





# CITY OF SIN

BOOK 03

*Misty South*

EPUB CREATION BY LISA HAYES

**City of Sin**

(罪恶之城)

by

**Misty Rain of Jiangnan**

(烟雨江南)

# Synopsis

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Every drop of this family bloodline is stained with sin. They are the embodiment of contradiction; calm yet maniacal, with great memories yet often forgetful. They pledge themselves to their dreams yet often compromise, are angels that are also devils... It's why I hate them. And also love them.

The only hope of his family, a youth with the blood of elves and devils walks on a battleground of annihilation and rebirth. He wills his way through boiling lava and icy depths, killing on this field of despair to strike down the lofty figure in his sight. One day he'll grasp his blade tightly and survey his surroundings, only to find no more enemies to kill.

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English Translation by ying, Theo, OMA @ [Wuxiaworld](#)

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# Book 3, Chapter 1 - Once Lazy And Luxurious

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The sky in Norland was just as dark as in Faelor, especially over Floe Bay. The thick clouds were so low the top of the Deepblue almost pierced through them, and even though it was morning the sea was dark as dusk. All the ships were anchored into the harbour, even the open sea ships that moved with magic not daring to set off. In the high seas, the weather was the true master. No matter how grand and large a ship was, one wouldn't dare go through a storm with it.

All the grand mages of the Deepblue were gathered at the conference room. It was time for their monthly meeting, and the figure of the legendary mage was missing as usual. Sharon had recently been coming and going in a hurry, showing her face for no more than half an hour each time. She would just open another portal, travelling to another plane.

The atmosphere in the hall was just as stressful as the weather outside. All of the mages looked glum, with no sunniness in sight.

Blackgold had a thick stack of papers in hand, and was reading out from it with a hoarse voice that made it sound like his mouth was filled with wood shavings. This was the report for the income and expenditure of the Deepblue in the past month. The numbers indicated that the finances were improving rapidly—no, they were going straight up. The most significant part, the categories of income and profit, had doubled from the last month. If not for their consumption increasing greatly as well, the profits would have grown much more than twofold.

This was a number that could stir anyone up, but none of the grand mages could bring themselves to be happy. Even the dwarf himself was listless. Looking closely, one would realise that this increase in income had come solely from Sharon obtaining ample harvests during her journeys through the myriad planes. Every time she returned, she normally left some of her profits in the

Deepblue.

She had gone to more planes in the past month than in the previous year. Normally in a hurry, she flung the spatial equipment with her harvests out and picked up new equipment. She would then set out immediately. She would hand Blackgold a list detailing the allocation of these things before tossing the huge pile of spatial rings, belts, bangles, and boxes over. She didn't even want to waste time discussing how to split it up in detail with the dwarf.

The flow of time in every plane was different, which was why nobody knew how long the mage was spending out. However, the statistics in the financial report gave Blackgold a rough idea. The legendary mage was working hard in a way that she never had before, and the wealth of the Deepblue was growing at a startling rate. With the wisdom of the grand mages, this increase in finances was turned into a method to raise their strength or to build a new source of income. This also served to increase the Deepblue's status on Norland.

However, they could not be happy with this upgrade.

Sharon could not hide the slight hints of fatigue whenever she returned. Her outfits seemed dusty and travel-worn, but even without resting she would leave once again. Her beloved fruits and snacks had already filled up the storage room, but if Blackgold didn't stuff some into her spatial equipment each time she wouldn't even think of taking them along on the journey.

The legendary mage was the soul of the Deepblue. When she lost her smile, the sky above Floe Bay would turn gloomy.

Blackgold was vexed as well. This was the first time in his life that these high numbers were aggravating in his eyes. He wanted to kick all this wealth from different planes away.

He would rather go back to the time when there was only a slight increase in income every month, when he worried about the



increasing deficits. He did not want to see the legendary mage so dedicated. The myriad planes were rife with dangers. Sharon surpassed normal legendary beings, but every time she explored a foreign plane there was the possibility that the trip was only one way.

It was when Sharon spent all day eating lazily that she was a true inspiration.

The long, tedious financial report turned into a hypnotic weapon under Blackgold's monotonous voice. Practically all of the grand mages were half asleep.

The elements in the room suddenly grew lively the next moment, the smooth flow of mana turning into a storm that blew the grand mages everywhere. A portal appeared out of the blue above the table, and Sharon jumped out. Her golden hair was tied casually in a ponytail, her blue robes showing signs of damage and corrosion. Her little face was even stained with dirt.

The legendary mage seemed like a girl next door who had just returned from a long journey. Under her robes were pants and shoes that were suited to travel, her normal extravagant clothes nowhere in sight. She jumped onto the conference table just like every other time, but this time it could not hold out. A crash rang out as the table broke apart into a pile of debris.

Only a few months ago, this would have enraged the legendary mage. She would start looking into the quality of the table, kicking up a mediocre storm. Now, however, she just stared at it blankly with seemingly no intention of flaring up.

Truth be told, the table was still the same one that could handle a mammoth weighing several tons. The real reason it was destroyed was that Sharon had a huge bundle on her back that was much larger than her body.

The grand mages all had a strange look in their eyes, unable to guess what exactly was in the bundle that she had to carry it on her



back so clumsily. Was all her spatial equipment full? The portals Sharon cast consumed a lot of mana. Without spatial equipment to seal it, any item she carried through would greatly increase the drain.

She shook her right hand, six rings coming off and flying towards Grandmaster Fayr, “Put these in my personal warehouse.”

Before Fayr could sigh at the mage’s sheer control to have two rings a finger, Sharon switched the hand carrying the bundle and sent three more rings and two bangles towards Blackgold, “These will enter the Deepblue’s stores. Also, get me new equipment.”

“It’s already prepared!” the dwarf immediately took a little pouch out of his robes, the insides clanging from the spatial rings and bangles filling it.

At some point, the legendary mage had started to wear more and more spatial equipment. Nobody knew her limit, but at the least it could not be counted on one’s fingers. With Sharon’s appearances growing more and more unpredictable, the dwarf always had spatial equipment on his person with some common supplies within.

The redundancy of so many items cost them a fair amount of money. The dwarf knew that property left idle would not garner profits. However, if it could save the legendary mage some time then these idle items did have value and their cost could be absorbed.

Two pieces of paper flew towards Fayr and Blackgold, “This is the plan to distribute and handle everything. Do as instructed.”

Both were made of magical paper that could be inscribed with a grade 8 spell, but Sharon was only using it for notes. The legendary mage then produced a little box from somewhere, tossing it to the dwarf, “Organise the things in here. Put them together with the special items from my last two visits, and send them all to little Gaton in Faust.”

The grey dwarf caught the flying box, rings, and bangles in a flurry, “I’ll get to it immediately!”

The legendary mage nodded in satisfaction. “Alright then, I’ll be off.” She opened a portal, taking the giant bundle and disappearing within.

“Wait! Your Excellency, you forgot to take your fruits!” the dwarf jumped up, raising a little spatial box that was enchanted to preserve food. However, Sharon had already made it far away. All that was left in the conference room was remnant ripples of mana.

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Gaton wasn’t in Faust, instead within Blackrose Castle in the traditional land of the Archerons.

The charming scenery of the peninsula had disappeared from the fields outside the city of Azan. With Blackrose Castle at the heart, great numbers of barracks had been erected extending to the outside of the city. More than 40,000 soldiers had been gathered here.

Eight of the thirteen rune knights had already reached Blackrose Castle. An army of sixty rune knights was stationed outside, most of Gaton’s military strength. The five remaining ones were the bare minimum requirement to keep a hold of his personal planes.

It wasn’t just Gaton’s banner in the barracks outside the city. A dozen or so camps had different flags flying high, although there were few troops stationed there. There were less than five hundred in the most populous one, with about a dozen in the least. Every branch family of the Archerons with basically any status had been gathered here.

The atmosphere in Blackrose Castle was as gloomy as the clouds over Floe Bay. The smell of sulphur and smoke pervaded the air of the meeting hall, making it evident that the people sitting around the table weren’t in a good mood.

Gaton was sat alone at the head, looking exhausted. The stubble all over his face made it known that he hadn't shaved for quite some time, and his eyes were bloodshot. At the right side of his neck was a thin wound that had just clotted over, looking like a new injury. Although the injury itself was insignificant, the position pointed to the risk he had suffered in that attack.

This was a meeting of all the Archerons. Despite being the family head, Gaton didn't seem the least bit impressive amongst them. His muddy boots were set on the table, arms crossed and eyes slightly closed as if he were napping. This attitude angered practically everyone present, and the hall was resounding with criticism.

## Book 3, Chapter 2 - Once Lazy And Luxurious(2)

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The criticism and even expletives were fine; none of it could hurt a hair on Gaton's head, and nobody did anything too drastic. His strength was unfathomable, and few even knew the degree of his might. However, what they did know was that the demonic Mordred standing silently behind him was growing stronger by the day.

Thud! Thud! A red-robed man lifted his staff in the midst of the chaos, knocking it on the table to quiet everyone down. He stood up and surveyed his surroundings, stating sternly. "In view of Marquess Gaton using the family's resources to fight meaningless wars, I suggest that he be stripped of his role as the family head. Island 7-2 should be managed by the family council."

"I agree!"

"As do I!"

The moment his words rang out, voices seconding him rang out in succession. At least seven Archerons raised their hands in agreement, nearly half the people there. A few hesitated a bit, but in the end their hands were raised as well. This way, more than half of those present were in agreement. Based on the idea of these new rules, this decision would be passed.

However, it was only the small lords that were speaking up. Most of the powerhouses of the Archeron Family had not made their stand known. The representative of Marquess Sauron merely rested his head on his chin, as if deep in thought. Earl Goliath was leaned back into his chair with his eyes closed, while Alice was trimming her nails with her longsword that was almost at the level of a divine weapon.

Gaton finally reacted to it all. He opened his eyes, glancing at the

red-robed old mage and sneering as he spat. Thick phlegm landed on the floor.

This only served to make the mage furious; the spit had effectively landed on his face. He was angered beyond belief, knocking the table with his staff once more as he yelled out, “Marquess Gaton! Take note of your actions! You are no longer the head of the Archérons, we do not need a leader who only thinks for himself! All your powers as head, including Blackrose Castle, are to be shifted to the family council!”

Gaton seemed not to have heard the old mage’s snarls, merely saying lazily, “Wine cup.”

Blood Paladin Senma immediately handed him a goblet that was astonishingly large, filled with half a bottle of red wine. Gaton swirled the liquid around; despite the enormous size of the cup, his movements looked elegant and practised. The liquid released a faint aroma, as would happen when one was tasting wine.

The mage only grew more enraged, this was another act of humiliation. He was about to break out into a vehement speech, but the goblet in Gaton’s hand suddenly appeared in front of him and exploded on his face. The impact sent him flying backwards, crashing to the ground like a pathetic doll.

The old mage struggled to stand up, his face a mix of blood and wine. He raised his trembling fingers towards Gaton, lips shaking, but words would not come out of his mouth. The fellow started swaying before he fell to the ground once more, unable to get back up.

This act had intimidated everyone into focusing on Gaton. Only then did the Archéron family head take his feet off the table and stand up, scanning through everyone and saying coldly, “Leadership of the Archéron Family has always been decided through battle. Since when were things chosen?”

His thunderous voice echoed throughout the meeting room,

leaving nobody able to refute. He rapped at the table and laughed coldly, “I don’t care what you think, and I don’t care about this whatever family council that popped out of nowhere. I became the head through battle, and anyone who wants to take that from me and live in Blackrose Castle needs to use their fists to chase me out. Now tell me. Who wants to be the head?”

Gaton’s gaze landed on Sauron’s representative, “Does Uncle have such a thing in mind?”

The representative of Marquess Sauron was the young Baron Sua, his son. Although only just twenty years of age, the youth wasn’t flustered at all under Gaton’s forceful gaze. His cheek didn’t even leave his hand as he replied, “Father told me that I’m just here to watch the show.”

An intelligent glint shone in Gaton’s eyes as he nodded, “Not bad. Seems like Sauron’s got a good son.”

Baron Sua smiled, but he did not speak.

Gaton’s gaze then landed on Goliath, “What about you, my dearest brother?”

The man with a large physique burst into laughter, “I need to get a few more pieces of land and a new personal plane. Once I become a Marquess as well, I’ll start considering going to war.”

Gaton nodded, looking towards Alice next. Before he could even say anything she spread her right hand and waved it in his direction, “Five rune knights will be enough to bribe me. Don’t try to fool me with grade 1’s.”

Gaton stroked his beard, unable to help but laugh, “Bribe you? Why should I bribe you?”

“If you’re going out in full strength, your nest might be destroyed by others. If Richard suddenly returns, I can be his protector. I just need five rune knights in exchange.”

Gaton chuckled in response, “There are quite a few people who

want to kill that kid. If I'm not around, do you really have the guts to get him?"

Alice returned to trimming her nails as if nobody was around, speaking dully, "What's there to be scared of? There's nobody in existence who hasn't regretted picking a fight with me, forget the pieces of trash in this room.

"Oh, and if any of you has anything to say about me I'll take that as a declaration of war. We'll start battling tomorrow, and it will be to the death." Alice's voice wasn't loud, but her exceptional strength was enough to suppress the clamour. All the curses immediately faded away; everyone knew that she really would do as she had said. It wasn't wrong to speak freely in the meeting, but if those words resulted in war that wouldn't be any good.

Gaton took it all in, "The meeting is over. I've decided that the war will continue. Also, this council or whatever is to be dissolved immediately; I better not hear anything about it in the future. The elders will uphold the family rules, and the rules state that he who has the power shall possess Blackrose Castle. If you want to join the ranks of the elders, power speaks for itself. If you don't even have that right, stop grumbling.

"As for the rest, do as you like. Those who want to stay here for a few days to have fun are welcome to, but your costs will be on you alone." Having said this, Gaton left the hall. All the Archerons within broke into discussion, while the old mage was helped up and left. He was only a level 14 great mage, and not the sturdy kind that came from the Deepblue. How could he withstand a hit from Gaton, even if it was casual? He was left without the strength to walk on his own.

And thus, the first Archeron family council meeting ended in violence, curses, intimidation, and threats.

Alice stood up after most of the others had left, stretching lazily before heading outside. Baron Sua had not left first either, his



twinkling eyes not moving off her in the slightest. Seeing her prepare to leave, he took large strides towards her as he asked with a smile, “Beautiful Earl Alice, may I have the honour of sharing dinner with you?”

Alice looked towards him with interest, the short red hair that looked like a fire giving her a blazing charm. The youth was outstanding in his own right, having made major contributions in planar wars. His personal strength at level 15 was more than enough to show that he had great talent. Although this wasn’t unfathomable for his age, he was of the rare breed that had no obvious weaknesses in any category. On top of being handsome, he also had the natural pride and unyielding character of the Archerons. In many situations, this was a fatal attraction.

“Dinner would just be the start, right?”

“Of course! if there’s a chance of it going further, I definitely won’t give up,” Sua admitted honestly.

“For a partner?” Alice asked bluntly.

“No, for marriage!” Sua was very resolute.

Alice smiled slightly, “But we don’t know each other.”

Sua’s eyes shone as he said in a low voice, “We will become comrades who fight side by side, companions who scheme great things; partners who live and die together. Love is merely an adornment in this process. Passion is like a volcano; after it erupts, all that’s left is cold ashes.”

Alice could not help but laugh, “A person with ambition! Ha!”

“A true wolf!” Sua added. His bright eyes were fixed on Alice’s beautiful face.

Alice shook her head, “I know what you’re thinking very well. What’s the point of making things so troublesome? I’m actually a very easy person to woo. Let’s put it simply: two rune knights for a dinner together, five for a kiss. Seven to touch my breasts, ten for

sex, and twenty to be partners. Like I said before, don't dupe me with mere grade 1's."

Sua was stunned.

"What, aren't my prices clear enough?" Alice asked, confused.

"Ah, no, no... This... Let me think about it..." Baron Sua was completely speechless. No matter how he thought about it, he could never have imagined this situation. It was difficult for him to even find the words to answer. Only now did he begin to understand how Alice's enemies felt. This beauty always did the unexpected.

Sua truly felt like she was an ideal partner, and she had realised this as well. He didn't doubt that she would do as said. As long as he had the necessary rune knights, she would eat, sleep, even have children with him just as promised.

However, that was what left him at a loss. He was Baron Sua, not Marquess Sua. He didn't even have a single grade 2 rune knight on hand. Only if he took over all of Sauron's lands and became a Marquess could he have the funds to buy Alice. And yet, his father had six daughters and eleven sons. Even though he was rather outstanding amongst his siblings, there was still a long way to go until he was a Marquess.

And when he really did become a Marquess, he definitely wouldn't be willing to pay such an amount.

Unable to pay when one wanted to, not wanting to pay when they could. Such was life, full of helplessness.

## Book 3, Chapter 3 - Once Lazy And Luxurious(3)

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Alice didn't wait for Sua's reply, walking straight out of the hall. His response was well within her expectations; although if he really did have the ability to provide twenty grade 2 rune knights, she wouldn't mind honouring her commitment. She knew clearly of her own worth and standing.

Blood Paladin Senma was waiting outside the door. When she saw Alice approaching, she immediately jumped up to welcome her, "Earl Alice! My Lord would like me to accompany you to select rune knights. You can choose five grade 2 rune knights from his personal guard."

"The Marquess is very generous!" Gatón's personal guard comprised of his most powerful elites.

"It's just a part of the deal," Senma said without expression. She didn't care much for Alice, and made no attempt to hide her disdain. With a big war approaching, five grade 2 rune knights were a powerful force. Outside of that, Alice was beautiful enough for even her to be jealous, which only added to the hate.

The Earl took large strides out of the ancient castle, her servants already waiting at the door with a bunch of draconic horses. She got up on her mount, towering over everyone else as she spoke to Senma who was behind her, "Tell him we have a deal. However, he can give me the knights another day, after the war ends."

Without waiting for the surprised Senma's response, Alice left abruptly alongside her personal guards and servants. She was getting busier with every passing day, and she had no interest in staying at Azan and watching Gatón's soldiers prepare for war. She immediately returned to her own territory. Looking at the shrinking back of the young earl, Senma couldn't help but soften her gaze.

Over the following days, several branch families left one after the other. Only a minority remained in Blackrose Castle.

At the back of the castle, a huge portal was almost complete. In but a few days, Gaton and his army would set out. A majority of the Archerons who stayed had a good relationship with the Marquess, or were at least on neutral terms. They were here to learn more about the construction of the portal, its protection, and the army.

A majority of families, even the more famous and powerful ones, did not have their own personal planes. That was a privilege of the most powerful bloodlines.

The Archerons had a total of eight planes under them combined. Three were controlled by Gaton, two by Marquess Sauron, and one by Earl Goliath. Alice had just obtained control of a lesser plane, and was in the process of constructing her forward base there. As for the last plane, that was held in tandem by five relatively small branches who all shared control. The rest of the branches did not have any to their name.

However, there was no shortage of ambitious families amongst the Archeron branches. Many of them were quite weak and would be completely destroyed even in a plane limited to level 18, but they never missed a chance to learn about planar warfare. As the family head, Gaton was willing to provide them that knowledge.

There were quarrels amongst the various branches of the family, and as they gradually expanded many scumbags had started to emerge from their ranks. However, an increase in the family's overall power was still a good thing.

Take Gaton for example. He had only come from an ordinary family himself, but he had fought his way to his current status. Who was to say that there weren't more like him amongst the family's youths?

While the portal was being finished, Gaton returned to Faust for a while. His first task was to visit the Church of the Eternal

Dragon. Nobody knew what he had discussed with high priestess Ferlyn, but when he returned to the Archeron island he seemed downcast. He locked himself in the highest tower of his castle.

This was Gaton's personal territory. Outside of him, nobody in the entire family was permitted entry. However, this tower was designed in a simple manner with nothing inside. There wasn't any decoration, leaving it bare apart from the rocks littered all over the place. The only thing beautiful about the place was the scenery of Faust through the full-height windows.

Gaton was sat upright at the centre of the empty hall, his two-handed sword laid by his feet. He shut his eyes, bringing himself to a strange realm of calmness. This was something he did before every major war. Such was his true self, being calm when necessary and exploding forth when it was time to fight.

The impending war was started in dangerous circumstances, completely unlike anything he had faced before. He had never been afraid of necessary risk, but that did not mean he was willing to shoulder unneeded dangers. In fact, it was quite the opposite; he had to make better preparations for this war, minimising his chances of failure.

However, this plan failed completely and utterly. The empty space in his surroundings suddenly shook violently, a shudder that was all too familiar stopping any thoughts of attacking. He had just opened his eyes when a huge package fell from up high with a resounding thud, landing right in front of him.

Looking at Sharon who had just jumped out of a portal, he forced a smile, "Do you really have to appear like this? Someone with a weaker heart would have been scared to death."

"Someone with a weak heart isn't worth a spacetime beacon on them," the legendary mage responded dully.

Gaton found it difficult to get used to the lack of the hearty smile and the boasts. It felt like the person in front of him was a stranger

who had only put on Sharon's face. However, even though the legendary mage's mood had changed so greatly there was still a faint aura of power that constantly reminded him of her identity.

"You really are Sharon," he said strangely.

"Haven't you changed as well?" The legendary mage replied.

"Only for the time being. I'll be back to normal once the war is over," Gaton answered.

"My change is only for now as well."

Gaton stared at the legendary mage for a while before shifting his gaze towards the large bundle, "What is this?"

"DON'T TOUCH IT!" Sharon launched an ice arrow, freezing half of Gaton's body to stop him from loosening the parcel. "Don't open it, that is antimagic cloth. Inside is the skull of an astral beast; once it fixes its gaze on anyone, even you, they'll immediately turn to stardust."

Even though Gaton was experienced and knowledgeable, he was still shocked upon hearing this. If the astral beast's gaze was that strong even when dead, not even a legendary being would dare to gaze upon it directly. If he had been quicker just now, his luck slightly worse, he would have disappeared from existence.

## Book 3, Chapter 4 - The Pillar Crumbles

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Gaton looked at the bundle with trepidation. It wasn't easy to identify that this dusty cloth could actually seal magic. Every square inch was worth a gram of abyssal emerald; so high was the quality of any material that could shield one from an astral beast's power. He furrowed his brows, "How did you get a hold of this terrifying thing?"

"I happened to see it when I was passing through a semiplane, so I slaughtered it along the way. Thankfully it wasn't as difficult as the lesser demon lord," Sharon said nonchalantly. Now that her hands were finally freed, she fixed her dishevelled hair before continuing, "When you come back alive, throw it to that old dragon. That way, we can eradicate the root of the problem."

"If there's nothing else, I'm leaving. I've been very busy lately."

"Wait!" Gaton called with a frown, "There are countless planes in existence. Without the Eternal Dragon's help, you won't just chance upon the plane Richard was sent to. You're doing this all for naught! It's extremely dangerous!"

"Who says I'm looking for him?" the mage snorted. "I'm just going through the planes and trying to get some money. You should worry about yourself, little Gaton. You should give up on the Mensas' plane and focus on the Schumpeter one. The stars are telling me your luck is awful right now."

It was Gaton's turn to groan, "If I don't take out the Mensas' plane, they'll continue to cause trouble with me. The old fellow has a lot of family property, who knows how many more sacrifices he can manage. Besides, they'll only spill details on what they offered after I beat them up. With that, we'll be able to find the plane Richard went to."

"Regardless, it'll be a very challenging journey. Besides, it's not likely for us to find Richard that way. The Schumpeters sent a



team to hunt him down, but they still haven't followed up on that. You can tell they don't have the coordinates either," Sharon commented rudely, coming to a conclusion, "Giving up would be a smart move. Richard was one of my students, this small issue won't faze him."

Gaton laughed heartily and retorted, "You still have the cheek to speak about me. What about you?"

A dangerous blue fire flashed subtly in the legendary mage's eyes. She replied indifferently, "When I was young, I made an agreement with the Sacred Alliance Emperor that I would never lay my hands on the houses of Faust. If not for that, I would've burnt the old Mensa lands to the ground already. Hmph! He has such high tolerance. He isn't responding no matter how much I provoke him, and refuses to let me get a hold of him."

Gaton stroked his short, steel-like beard, revealing a charming smile that was rife with danger, "Isn't that exactly what I'm about to do?"

Sharon's gaze locked deeply into Gaton's eyes, "If you want to court your own death, it's up to you. Also, I've told Blackgold to deliver a batch of items, keep them well. They're all little things to throw to the old dragon. If little Richard comes back suddenly, give them to him. Take it as a gift, for my sister's joy.

"But it's for Richard, not you Archeron fellows!"

"As long as I'm around, nobody will dare lay their hands on his things," Gaton answered.

The legendary mage nodded, turning around to step through a portal. Her ponytail jumped around in the air as she disappeared into the light.

Sharon's visit had been brief, but it left Gaton feeling troubled. He looked at the bundled head of the astral beast, feeling lost for a moment. Even after pondering over it for a long while, he couldn't

think of any method to hide it somewhere safe. Eventually he just issued a death order to guard the tower; as long as he himself wasn't present, nobody was allowed to enter the highest floor.

As for thieves, no thief could steal from the islands of Faust. And even if one somehow infiltrated the sacred land to try and steal the astral beast's head, they would likely just disintegrate into stardust that was too small to be seen by the naked eye.

A few days later, the portal to the Mensa plane had finally been constructed. Gaton had invested many years of his savings to build it, even doubling his debt to Sharon for the sake of a gigantic, stable passageway. The other end was located in one of the nine personal planes of the Mensas.

Personal planes were the core of a family's economy. If one was under attack, they would be hurt greatly.

Even as the construction of the portal was completed, Gaton was waiting before it. Eight of his thirteen were lined up behind him, followed by a troop of thirty grade 2 and sixty grade 1 rune knights. Behind them were 40,000 elite soldiers.

When the dazzling rays of light burst open at the portal, Gaton had Darkmoon Blackflame move forward. He raised the sword that had reaped countless lives, leading the army through the gate.

The ferocious soldiers charged in after him, beginning a journey with their fates unknown. The Mensa family was unlike the Josephs and the Schumpeters. They had accumulated a profound support system over thousands of years. Even Gaton couldn't predict the outcome of this battle.

As the last team entered, the radiance of the portal started to dim. Although it was a stable passageway, it still took an immense amount of energy to transport the huge army. Left with its last dregs of energy, it could barely maintain contact between the two planes.

When the expedition reached its end, the people on the other side would transmit a special signal. Those appointed to stay behind on this end would then supplement the portal with magic crystals, allowing the troops to return.

The cost of travel was the greatest expense of this expedition. If their profits weren't abundant enough, they might very well incur losses from this war.

Dozens of mages were busy at work below the portal, trying to stabilise it and lower its mana consumption even as they set up some defensive formations. There were also plenty of arrangements in place to deal with the aftermath.

However, that very moment, sudden waves of strange energy burst forth from the stable portal. Although the light had almost been extinguished, it suddenly burst open and even started to shake violently! The mages were astonished. Before they could even process what had happened, they were assaulted by an unknown force and shoved into the formations. Their mana was sucked away like water, the vibration of the portal growing more and more violent. The rays of light coming from it started to burn!

Eventually, under their horror-stricken gazes, the portal exploded loudly! The severe explosion didn't just destroy the infrastructure in the plaza, covering the entire wall of the castle facing the plaza in cracks! The Archerons who were watching the troops depart, yet to regain their senses in the face of this magnificent scene, suffered an instant death.

However, there was something much more important than the lives of these branch families: Gaton's troops had no way back!

## Book 3, Chapter 5 - The Pillar Crumbles(2)

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The incident with the portal exploding shocked the entire Sacred Alliance. Although it wouldn't affect the situation in Norland too greatly, it had definitely given many sensitive people some new ideas.

Gaton's large army was trapped within the Mensas' personal plane. Judging from the timing of the explosion it should have passed through the channel, but few were optimistic about the Archeron head's future. Dire was an understatement to describe the situation of a large army without supplies.

The battle between the Archerons and the Mensa-Joseph-Schumpeter alliance was without a doubt the core of Faust's recent politics. Gaton had used an unbeatable offence to sweep across the Schumpeter Family's plane and followed it up by defeating a united army that included the Josephs on Norland's soil. His fame and power were currently unparalleled in the Sacred Alliance!

The fight against the Mensas had just started, but Gaton had already forced his way into one of their personal planes with great momentum. Nobody had expected such an abrupt change.

Nobody knew why the Archerons' portal had suddenly exploded. Logically speaking, a portal to a registered plane should have been incredibly stable; the destination and Norland were basically tied together by chains. If not for that, there wouldn't be nearly as many families who paid exorbitant sums of money for the coordinates of their opponents' planes.

Few times in history had such an explosion occurred, not more than could be counted on one's hands. Of course there were many more incidents with unstable passages, portals being destroyed more than half the time.

Earl Goliath received the news only two hours after the explosion. His lands were very close to Blackrose Castle, and as a

step-brother that was related to the Azan branch within the past three generations he was basically the first to receive the news.

Hearing about it and calmly verifying the information, the giant had locked himself in his study for a day and night without word or food. Only the next evening did he walk out of his room, returning to managing his territory and his plane as usual like nothing had happened.

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Evening the next day, Alice received the news as she was going through her army. It was small in scale, but all the soldiers were shockingly powerful and well-equipped. When her right hand passed on the information, the warlord who never lost focus blanked out for a moment. The longsword in her hands fell quietly to the ground without her even noticing.

And yet, she had recovered in the next moment. Her sword flew back to her with a beckon, and she spoke up to her right hand, “No worries, don’t do anything for now. Let’s talk about it after a while, that fellow always creates miracles.”

“As you wish, my Lady,” came the response. However, the right hand thought things over for a moment and reminded Alice softly, “My lady, what about Faust...”

Smack! Alice hit her own head heavily, “I completely forgot! Send a few capable men over imme— no, go yourself, and get to island 7-2! Right away!” Alice’s lands were incredibly far from Azan, and she intentionally avoided having intelligence officers in the region, so it was already a little late when she received the news.

The right hand was a young and beautiful woman, but the unconcealable killing intent was a constant reminder that she definitely wasn’t someone to belittle. The Earl herself held her in high regard. Hearing Alice’s instructions, the woman’s murderous aura burst forth as she responded fiercely, “No need to worry, my

Lady. I'll definitely snatch the islands for us!"

Alice was stunned at this response, laughing despite herself, "Why do we need something so flashy? Your only assignment is to monitor Faust for Richard's return. I've had a premonition that he might come back at any time, and if he does appear it's most likely to be at Faust. If he returns and there is still no news of Gaton's return, then you should do whatever it takes to bring him back to my lands!"

"Richard? The one who's rumoured to be a future saint runemaster? But there are many people who want him..." The right-hand was a little worried.

The corners of Alice's lips curved up slightly in a smile and she said, "There's nothing to be afraid of, he just needs to reach my territory. Anyone who wants to snatch Richard away can come and try. Don't forget, I'm the goddess of war!"

The right hand smiled helplessly, quietly reminding her master, "Only a few people recognise that title!"

"Why does the number matter? Anyone who has ever fought me recognises the title, that's enough!"

The right hand nodded her head, her confidence boosted a little.

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News of the incident spread explosively, even faster than the ripples of an earthquake.

The day before Faust's Assembly of Lords met, the city's central square was filled with luxurious carriages. This definitely wasn't something seen often, and had only occurred because of the events at Blackrose Castle.

The assembly building was large and white, with twelve huge, pristine pillars that served the purpose of magnificent decoration. The building that could accommodate a thousand people was just like these pillars, originally just a flashy institution. Even though

all the powerful families of Faust had seats in the Assembly, they normally never attended these meetings. Any resolutions passed here did not even apply to them. The families occupying the flying islands had paved their path with blood, and blood was the price if one wished to restrict them.

However, this meeting was different. A majority of the seats in the outer amphitheatre were already filled with people, all here to listen to the meeting. Even if not many were eligible to participate in the meeting, many could at least manage to qualify for a visit.

In the exact centre was a round table encircled by luxurious and magnificent seats. Every chair had tall legs with exquisite and intricate carvings, a throne-like backrest and armrests that curved outwards. So spacious were these seats that they bordered on excessive, each at least twice as big as a normal chair.

These were the exclusive seats of the families that occupied the floating islands, the Silver Chairs. Even the royal family could only occupy one.

These chairs that represented supreme power and luxury were normally left empty. However, just as the assembly was about to start wheels sounded on the pavement as a luxurious carriage stopped before the steps. An old man with grizzled hair that was fully clothed in formal attire strode up the steps and into the meeting grounds. The moment he entered, a buzz sounded from the venue as everyone broke into discussion.

“Isn’t that an elder of the Schumpeter Family? Why is he here?”

“That’s right. Weren’t they heavily wounded, desperately trying to intercept the Anan Family that’s advancing towards Faust? How is he still in the mood to appear here?”

“Don’t tell me he still wants to take one of the Silver Chairs...”

“Exactly!”

The Schumpeters had been defeated twice in the battle with



Gaton, their fertile personal planes captured and their rune knights annihilated. The family had lost at least half its power, and it was but a foregone conclusion that they would be kicked out from Faust's families.

Every high noble required a minimum amount of strength of character. Weakened as they were, the Schumpeters definitely couldn't bend to the normal families of Faust. They either had to defend their status with blood or completely withdraw. However, none here had expected an elder of a family that was on the eve of being driven out of Faust would still appear at the assembly.

However, the representatives of various other powerful families started appearing one after the other as well. Almost all of the Silver Chairs were filled.

A moment later, the crowd went into an uproar once again. The royal family had actually sent a representative! Prince Morden had just arrived, leaving all but two of the seats occupied. Only the Archeron and Mensa seats were empty.

And everyone that was well-informed knew that these families were the stars today.

Footsteps sounded from outside the building once more, and the people immediately cried out in surprise. The Mensa Family hadn't sent out any normal representative; Duke Mensa himself was here!

The Duke was hale and hearty, his steps powerful as he strode to his seat. He was in no hurry to sit down, his lips curling into a small smile with relish as his gaze passed over the empty Archeron seat.

The Duke raised both hands, quieting the entire venue down before his bold and powerful voice resounded through the area, "Ladies and gentlemen. Before this meeting begins, I have two important pieces of news to tell you.

"The first is very disappointing. The family's Rosie plane, the one

I named after my beautiful granddaughter, faces an abnormal situation. The portal to it blew up, and more importantly, its registration in the Church of the Eternal Dragon disappeared as well.”

He hadn't finished speaking before an uproar erupted. The registration disappearing meant that the plane had broken away from the Eternal Dragon's system, once more a drifting plane. Not only would re-establishing the connection require a great expense, the original coordinates weren't even necessarily valid.

However, Duke Mensa's expression was very thought-provoking; despite the loss of such a fertile plane, he did not seem upset in the least. Some of the insiders knew that this was precisely the plane that Gaton had attacked. As for those who did not know before, few were too stupid to miss the connection.

Erasing the registration of the plane was equivalent to turning it into a prison that completely trapped Gaton and his large army within. There had been theories on how to accomplish such a thing, but nobody had ever truly tried it or even explored the idea before.

A plane was invaluable, with the more mature ones having no shortage of resources and area even compared to Norland. It normally took hundreds of years to barely establish some footing in one of the larger planes.

Families rose and fell in the endless planar wars, but nobody would completely give up on a plane. Even if it fell into the hands of the opponent, once could still seize it again.

## Book 3, Chapter 6 - The Pillar Crumbles(3)

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This was extremely shocking news. Most of the people gathered here actually just wanted to confirm the fate of Gaton and his army. Even groundless rumours would be good. However, Duke Mensa had just sated their curiosity and perhaps even more. The only thing he hadn't done was announcing his hand in the destruction of the Archeron portal, trapping Gaton at the expense of an entire plane.

And yet, the process wasn't all that important. It would only be a topic for idle conversation over meals. The most important bit was the result: when would Gaton return, or rather, could he?

Allowing the audience to take in this first piece of news, Duke Mensa then threw out the second, "Also, the Mensas and Schumpeters will henceforth be the closest of allies, joined together by blood. My most beautiful granddaughter, Rosie, is to be engaged to the head of the Schumpeter Family, the mighty general, swordsman, and artist, Dario Schumpeter! Their children shall inherit the family's status and lands. Any malicious intent aimed at the Schumpeter Family will henceforth be considered a declaration of war against the Mensas!"

This sent everyone into an uproar once more.

This was both the most and least common kind of marriage contract one could hear of. Most often because marriage alliances were normal; such an act would greatly increase the two families' cooperation in certain areas. Least common because such contracts almost never designated the heir to the family, especially with powerhouses like the Schumpeters.

Mensa was toying around with a concept commonly seen amongst the aristocracy. When the Schumpeter leaders had Mensa blood flowing in them, it would not be difficult to swallow up the family. Although this was a slow process, it was also the best way

to combine the strength of two families. Houses that had been in power for millennia employed such tactics often; the small cost of a marriage was nothing if it would give them the Schumpeters.

A noble suddenly got up from his seat at that moment, shouting, “Your Grace, the Anan Family’s army is currently marching towards Faust. What is your opinion on this matter? Will you be participating?”

Duke Mensa smiled in response, speaking with calm confidence, “The Mensa Family will abide by the old traditions, sending out suitable forces to stop them. This is tradition that has held ever since this very city was built. However, I believe Dario’s eye for strategy is strong enough for him to retain his island.”

These words sounded pompous, not giving anything away, but the message they conveyed was very clear—the Mensas would do all they could to beat down the Anan Family.

Marquess Anan was an ambitious, formidable person with great skill and strategy. Three of the fourteen families of Faust were close allies of his, but even combined they could not compare with the Mensas. He had chosen impeccable timing to march for Faust, exactly when the Schumpeters had been beaten down by Gatón. Their close allies in the Josephs had also suffered greatly. However, nobody could have thought that such terrible misfortune would occur while the Archerons were going all out to attack the Mensa Family.

Just as Duke Mensa finished his words, a few of the nobles in the assembly turned pale and coughed loudly. He definitely heard these sounds, but only brushed his gaze past them without any other response. The Anan Family was already halfway to Faust, having paid a huge price. Whether they advanced or retreated, the situation would not end up well.

The Duke returned to his seat after the announcement, occasionally whispering something to the person next to him. He

had no interest in the proceedings of the assembly whatsoever, only taking the opportunity to hand out information that he had exchanged a plane for Gaton and his army. Although this was a huge price to pay, it was definitely worth it.

The Archerons had no lack of people with ambition. Gaton was a formidable legend of his generation, quiet and unknown in his younger years but rising like a comet to bring the family to new heights as he obtained huge profits in his campaigns. He wasn't just the family head, instead an idol worshipped by all the younger Archerons. He could even be called their spiritual leader. The boorish, uninhibited man had a charm that was hard to pull down. Only he could gather thirteen knights of varying abilities, leading them on a magnificent march towards Faust. Only he could keep Mordred the Devil King under control.

Gaton's disappearance also entailed the immediate loss of most of the thirteen. Even those who stayed for a day or two only had too much luggage to pack quickly. Eliminating him was akin to removing the Archeron Family's spine. Although Alice had amazing ability as a general, she was just far too young. She was a rib at most.

Sitting comfortably in his seat, Mensa's mind was not on the vehement debates. He was still here purely for the sake of manners; that was a field in which the rich and powerful never failed. Even Prince Morden was calmly listening to the elegant rhetoric that was devoid of substance. Patience was a virtue of true nobles. Duke Mensa was already impatient to see the huge profits from Gaton's disappearance, as well as what kind of drama the Archerons would stir up.

Gaton's floating island was empty in a way it had never been before. Five of his thirteen knights could keep guard on it at most, but this was an impossible ask. The reason he had only taken eight of his knights on the expedition was that the other five were left behind to guard his personal planes.

The islands of Faust were more a symbol of status and glory, not producing actual resources. In fact, they actually cost a lot to maintain. That was why the five knights would likely continue protecting the planes over the island. As long as a plane was around, the Archerons would have the capital to rise once more.

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The sun set, and Faust entered a radiant, confusing night that was like a dream.

The light of a portal flickered within a secret room in the Joseph Family's castle, and Raymond Joseph stepped out. The screen of light shook the moment he exited it, a common sight with spatial passages. One could withstand such a thing as long as they had a modicum of strength, but Raymond swayed and his legs went weak. He staggered forward; if not for a guard at the side of the portal supporting him in time, he would have fallen to the ground.

“Lord Raymond, are you alright?” the guard asked quickly.

## Book 3, Chapter 7 - Politics

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Raymond looked pale, his forehead beaded with cold sweat. The arteries on his neck were still pulsating; he spent a while coughing intensely before he could finally calm his breath.

A tall, dignified old man walked into the teleportation hall. Seeing the state Raymond was in, he immediately quickened his footsteps and went over, “Do you need a priest?”

The youth feebly shook his head, “No need. The spatial ripples were a little strong is all, I’ll be fine after some rest. A divine spell... I can’t use them too much. Don’t worry about me, Father. Time is limited, let’s go to the command centre, I’ll tell you about the developments in the campaign.”

The Joseph Family’s command centre was tall and spacious, the table in the middle a high-ranked artifact that could store up to nine complete three-dimensional maps. Outside of the map of Norland, the Josephs had five personal planes. Their dream was to someday use the table to its fullest.

The servants had already moved a tall chair over that was meant especially for Raymond. It would allow him to save his strength, looking through the maps from a seated position. Raymond hadn’t always needed it, but it had been used more and more frequently as of late.

Two of the family’s mages injected the table with mana to reveal a map before they retreated immediately. This was one of the family’s greatest secrets, and they could not pry.

Raymond placed an information crystal into a slot at the centre of the table, and the map immediately changed. Numerous cities, stronghold, and other labelled positions showed themselves, including numbers of knights, swordsmen, mages, and the like.

Using a custom-built pointer, he indicated an extensive river



valley, “The seven-month expedition into Alfar ended in a decisive victory. We dealt a heavy blow to the allied armies and took over Torrent Valley. Here are the details: I started with having the sixth light cavalry unit detour around the Werewolf Ravine and cut back into the allied forces...”

Raymond’s voice was soft, his words interspersed with light coughs. However, a thrilling battle played out on the table to complement his gentle narration. Both sides had used a total of nearly 50,000 troops, and Raymond had been at a disadvantage. However, the tides had ebbed and flowed for an entire month before his unpredictable, relentless attacks had completely destroyed the enemy’s army. No more than 4,000 enemy soldiers had died in battle, but an entire 15,000 were taken captive to leave the army in chaos.

This campaign had pushed forward the Joseph Family’s lines in the plane greatly, and over 500,000 locals had come under their domain. They had obtained a strategic location in Kerra Pass, proof of Raymond’s ability in command.

Duke Joseph just scanned through the image before turning to look at Raymond, his eyes filled with a complex worry. He knew that travelling between planes was a huge burden given Raymond’s physical condition. If he could, he would rather exchange the entire plane for Raymond’s health.

After finishing the difficulty explanation, Raymond looked up and stated confidently, “Father, nobody can chase us out of the plane anymore. However, a few of the gods are still a little troublesome. We might need two lesser sacrifices to prevent them from doing anything crazy.”

“Sacrifices aren’t the issue,” the Duke said with a sigh, “Raymond. Stay here from now, don’t go to other planes. There’s no need for you to worry about these matters anymore. I just hope you’ll be able to relax and do what you like in the coming years. Leave the planes to your brothers and sisters; they may not

measure up to you, but they're still capable of stabilising the situation. If that doesn't work out, I'm still here. Do you think I'm so old I can't even go to our planes?"

Raymond coughed a few times before he could reply, "Father, we aren't in a good situation. These past few years... the war with the Archerons used up too many resources. We may look strong on the outside, but we could collapse at any moment. I... I can't see the family like this. Progress in the planar wars is extremely important now more than ever, we just have too few resources especially to sacrifice. Although I never asked you before, I know that most of our reserves are gone. Besides... our opponent is Gaton, and perhaps Richard in the future. When you fight these lunatics, taking it slow will be the death of you!"

Duke Joseph's lips twitched, and he paced back and forth in the room. Finally, he made up his mind, "Raymond, don't worry about the offerings. My reputation is still worth something; some old friends already agreed to give me some. In addition to our own stores, we have enough for two intermediate sacrifices. You should offer them both times; if there are any time-related blessings, use them on yourself! If you're lucky, you might just get a few more decades!"

Raymond shook his head, "You're being foolish, father. You know my condition; blessings of time have no effect and will only stop my body from ageing. It won't cure me of my disease. Why waste them on me? It took us great effort to establish a foothold in this new plane, we need a way to prevent the native gods from meddling. If they stop caring about the consequences, won't our situation be destroyed? We'll have to build a new passageway!"

"As for me, a few years don't matter. As a son of the Joseph Family, I am willing to put my life on the line. I'm very unstable; no matter what you say, I'm not going to be the one performing the ceremony."

Having said all this, Raymond broke out into a fierce round of

coughs. His face turned red, body curling up like a fish out of water.

The Duke smashed his fist on the tabletop, speaking furiously, “Can’t your disease be healed by a high-ranked offering? Am I unable to do even that?!”

Raymond smiled, “A? You’re being impatient. You should know; even if we acquire a high-ranked offering, it isn’t guaranteed that we’ll get the blessing we need.”

Joseph froze up, only able to sigh heavily at the end.

The blessings of the Eternal Dragon were restricted to a certain range. High-ranked offerings could limit this to what the offerer most desired, but that still left over a hundred different things that were chosen from at random. While the most fortunate greatly improved their chances of getting what they wanted, that did require a great deal of luck.

One needed to have unsurmountable power, great luck, or the liking of the old dragon himself to be given exactly what they wanted. The fortunes of both him and his father were far from good. How else would they have gotten on bad terms with an enemy like Gaton? There were bound to be many stepping stones that adorned the rise of someone formidable.

“There’s no harm in trying,” the Duke said with a wry smile. He then continued, “Perhaps I should seek out Her Excellency Sharon. She definitely has enough offerings at hand, it’s just that the interest is a little high.”

Raymond was unsure of whether he should laugh or cry, “Father! You’re becoming a fool! Have you forgotten that Richard was from the Deepblue? It’s said that Her Excellency paid special attention to him, and he created a record in terms of her Delight. Besides, if not for her support, how could the Archeron Family— no, how could Gaton Archeron have so many powerful offerings? We’ve basically pushed the student she is most proud of into a desperate situation!

Don't forget, not only did we change the coordinates of the plane Richard was meant to go to, we also interfered with Gaton's sacrifices that were meant to find him twice!"

Duke Joseph could only take a deep breath and state bitterly, "Things might have been better if we hadn't touched Richard. We paid such a large price, but we still don't know if he's dead."

"No, he has to be!" Raymond was surprisingly resolute. "He's no normal genius, but someone who can turn the tides of a battle! If it was a regular runemaster, there would be no need to pay such a huge price. But I managed to see his runes... They give off an indescribable feeling! Unbelievably precise, filled with unconstrained imagination that challenges convention yet somehow not breaking the rules. His runes have soul! And his own soul is a volcano sealed in ice! Cough, cough..."

Raymond got more agitated as he spoke, his face swelling red. The coughing grew so intense he had to pause and recover before he could continue, "If he's allowed to develop, we might very well be driven out of Faust. In the entire history of Norland, who has managed to challenge a saint runemaster and ended up well?"

Duke Joseph frowned, "Richard shouldn't be returning. While we've nearly used up all our offerings stored up, there's still the Mensas..."

At this point, the Duke suddenly remembered something and stopped speaking.

"The Mensas..." Raymond muttered, continuing after a long while, "Father, we should be careful with them. Duke Mensa is one of the few people I cannot see through, but I know he is very ambitious. If we assume that his edge has dulled with age, it's a huge mistake. The battle with the Archerons needs to be controlled, just in case he takes advantage and enters. He... He's the wiliest of wolves."

The Duke nodded in response.

Raymond remembered something, “Right, I almost forgot. How’s the trap we prepared for Gaton? Did his army set out? According to my calculations, it should be nearly time.”

Duke Joseph hesitated, “Mm, it was only yesterday. Gaton took eight of his thirteen, bringing along his main elites and 40,000 troops to enter Rosie.”

Raymond was both alarmed and delighted, “What about his teleportation gate?”

“Completely destroyed in the explosion, just like you planned,” the Duke stated calmly. However, there was no joy on his face.

“Great!” Raymond jumped in excitement, “Even if Gaton’s amazing and can create miracles, he’ll need at least ten years to get back! These ten years will be very important to us! Hopefully, I can hold on for that long. Of course, there’s the chance he’ll never return and just die there. Rosie is comparable to a drifting plane now, after all. Since that’s the case, I’m in no hurry to return. There are still some people amongst the Archerons that are difficult to deal with; I’ll stay behind just in case they’re driven to do something desperate.”

Duke Joseph glanced at Raymond and sighed again, “Mensa announced the news about the plane at the assembly today. He also announced something else: Rosie is going to be engaged to Dario Schumpeter.”

“What?!” Raymond was greatly shocked. He stood still for a second, suddenly turning pale before he sprayed blood from his mouth.

Duke Joseph didn’t know what to say. All he could do was lightly pat his son’s back, using his powerful energy to appease his son’s chaotic blood.

Coughing out another mouthful of blood, Raymond took out a handkerchief and wiped at the corner of his mouth. He gradually

calmed down, eventually just laughing bitterly, “Is this... politics?”

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The next morning, island 5-4. The Sacred Emperor entered his breakfast room, footsteps as precise as a clock. Standing in front of the tall window that overlooked Faust, he squished his huge body into the chair with difficulty.

The chair had been changed many times. The only reason it wasn't bigger now was that the material was far too precious. Even the Sacred Alliance Emperor couldn't make too large a throne out of a material that was used in grade 4 runes.

The aperitif was wine, with the main course being medium-rare dragon tail. There were some scales here and there, something tailored to the emperor's unique tastes. Chewing on the fragrant and crisp scales was a type of pleasure.

When the emperor began eating, a servant started to report every important event from the previous day. The news of Gaton's army being trapped on Plane Rosie was the headline.

Philip suddenly halted his movements, freezing like a statue. The servant knew that this was a sign of His Imperial Majesty pondering over the matter, and was tactful enough not to continue. He instead just watched the Emperor think.

Philip's body gradually grew hotter and hotter. Three minutes later, his dazed expression suddenly twitched and an intense flame spouted out of his mouth. It roasted the dragon tail until it was well done.

## Book 3, Chapter 8 - Ripples

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The Emperor swallowed the burnt tail in one go, his fat neck suddenly swelling up as the near ten kilos of meat fell into his stomach with a loud thud. With everything back to normal, he squinted his eyes and said slowly, “This move was really unexpected!”

The servant started racking his brain to figure out what those words meant before speaking up, “With Lord Gatton’s strength, he will likely return to Norland within ten years.”

“Not necessarily! It depends on the time-flow in the Rosie plane,” the emperor said dryly, revealing a tiny bit of his ability, “The plane’s time moved half as fast as in Norland before, but nobody knows what Mensa did now. I don’t believe that he did nothing; I hear he’s been to the Church several times recently.”

The servant immediately put on an arrogant expression in an attempt to earn some credit, “As far as this humble servant knows, Duke Mensa and Duke Joseph offered three sacrifices recently. They all concerned the Archerons’ young master, Richard. I don’t know what the specific blessings were.”

Ceremonies held at the Church of the Eternal Dragon were secret events. Not even the royal family could interfere in the matter of the blessings. As for Ferlyn, the First Light of Dawn had status surpassing all else. Nobody could force her to do something she didn’t want to, not to mention that offending her would cut off one’s route to offer sacrifices. Even visitors would think twice before trying to get her to do anything. She was a mysterious character; nobody knew of her true power, there was just no need to ever showcase them.

However, Ferlyn being watertight did not translate to the rest of the priests and priestesses. The servant had already bribed some clerics, and although they didn’t know of any vital information it

was still news that would otherwise go unknown.

The Emperor nodded, seemingly thinking of the same thing, “If that is true, Mensa and Joseph really put in some capital.”

“Yes, Your Majesty! However, is it really worth it?” the servant sighed with sorrow. Interfering with a blessing required a more powerful offering than the original. Richard’s original sacrifice had been pretty valuable, and the two families needed something that was twice as great to hurt him. That was why the Emperor said they had really put in some capital.

On the other hand, even if they themselves were poor the Archerons had the support of a legendary mage. Although Sharon wasn’t wildly wealthy either, she could still destroy a few powerful families without issue. At least in the Sacred Alliance, she only lost battles of wealth if they were sneak attacks.

The servant’s thoughts were forgivable. He was someone of authority within the alliance, but even if he fought his entire life he would not have the resources to offer the lowest level of sacrifice. The Church of the Eternal Dragon was completely out of his reach.

“Those old fogeys don’t do useless things. They definitely wouldn’t joke around with sacrifices. If they’ve offered so many, this kid has to be worth a lot. We might have to pay more attention to him; is there any news?”

“About that...” the servant stretched his memory, finally remembering a small excerpt, “I heard he set out on an expedition into a lesser plane, but some problems occurred and he got lost in time. There hasn’t been any news since.”

Philip pondered for a while before asking, “I heard the Eternal Dragon came down personally during his sacrifice?”

“I heard of it as well, Your Majesty. However, there is no way to verify it.”



The Bloodthirsty Emperor nodded his head, “Then it’s most likely true. If the old dragon favours this Richard kid, then he’ll be safe wherever he is. It isn’t too far-fetched to think he could appear in front of us soon.”

The servant grew very excited, “No need to worry, Your Majesty! If Richard were to return, your humble servant will be the first to go look for him. I heard that he is a gifted runemaster; it just so happens that your knights’ runes are ageing. Grandmaster Lunor’s ‘body’ hasn’t been in good condition lately; if someone were to come and make alterations in his stead, it would be helpful.”

Grand runemaster Lunor had acted as the Sacred Alliance’s chief runemaster for over thirty years. As he shifted to the creation of grade 4 runes over the past decade, his creation of standard runes had decreased even as he consumed more and more raw materials by the day. This was a problem every royal household faced with these kinds of runemasters.

Philip nodded, having the servant continue the report. The second piece of news was naturally the engagement between the Mensas and Schumpeters. Hearing this news, Philip immediately stopped cutting through his meal. He knew exactly what it implied.

“Your Majesty, are you going to allow Duke Mensa to do whatever he wants?”

The Emperor didn’t answer, instead asking a question of his own, “Rosie is getting married to Dario?”

“Yes, the pearl of the Mensa family. Your humble servant heard that this was a request made by Duke Dario himself. There are twenty young ladies in the Mensa Family worth him, but he only wanted her.”

“Hmph! That lecher hasn’t changed his ways... However, this is still a smart move. It won’t let Mensa get too comfortable. Ugh... since that is the case, we shall do nothing for now.”

The servant responded with a puzzled look, “Your Majesty... Would this not allow the Mensas to grow too quickly?”

“Rosie was meant to be betrothed to Raymond Joseph. Hmph, his old man must not be feeling good about this. For now, we don’t have to do anything.

“A wolf and tiger in the same valley would naturally band together if a hunter appears. However, if there is no hunter they will likely fight until only one is left standing.”

“Your Majesty is brilliant!” the servant complimented glibly.

“Now, go fetch the court mage. Tell him I’ll be waiting in my living room, I need to know how one can erase a plane from the Church of the Eternal Dragon.” Having said that, Philip stood up. A maid naturally moved over to wipe his mouth, wash his hands, and change his clothes.

The servant made a sound of acknowledgement, but then he realised most of the food on the table was untouched. “Your Majesty!” he called out in astonishment, “You haven’t eaten anything!”

“I don’t have the appetite.” The Bloodthirsty Emperor took big strides out of the dining room. His footsteps were as loud as a dinosaur storming off.

## Book 3, Chapter 9 - Ripples(2)

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Island 7-2 had already become the focus of the Sacred Alliance. The news of Gaton's main forces being trapped in the Rosie plane spread like wildfire across the mainland. Outside of the Sacred Tree Empire and Millennial Empire where the Archerons didn't have much of a reputation, all the nobles were talking about the rarity of a planar portal exploding. However, no matter how one looked at it, the Archerons were an important family in the Sacred Alliance; they were very careful when the topic was mentioned.

The Archeron Family was now incomparably empty. Even a random Marquess could enter their territory and basically tour the place without an issue. But only someone whose head was broken would do so; the normal ones only felt a little pleased. Not many were willing to provoke the bunch of lunatics, the line between madmen and geniuses was often very thin.

Gaton was a man of miracles. There were no enemies that could not be crushed under the weight of his greatsword and Darkmoon Ember's iron hooves. Who would dare say the Rosie plane could keep a volcano such as him trapped forever?

And thus, island 7-2 was like a slab of meat that radiated a draconic aura. Even though a pack of wolves was surrounding it, none dared to take the first bite. Every group wanted someone else to test the waters.

There were actually a lot of people on the island itself. However, most of them were sent by the branch families for various reasons. Of course, the true intentions behind these fellows being here couldn't be more evident.

Ever since Gaton went missing, his steward had become the busiest person on the island. Not one of the five remaining knights was keeping watch here, and Gaton's children were still small. Wennington and Venica were only fourteen or fifteen years old

and lacked the power to control the situation. Their mothers' families were already trying to impede each other, so how could they frighten the wolves and tigers from the branches?

Within a few days, the man was left wan and haggard, like he had aged ten years in the blink of an eye. He had already relayed the news to the five knights who were guarding other planes, but they had all replied that they had to remain. As long as the planar portals were under guard, those planes would still belong to the Archerons. Anyone who was sent out to defend a plane had to have an eye for strategy; they immediately saw the root of the problem. The only issue was that the steward had to suffer a little.

The steward was only a servant after all, while those of the branch families were still nobility. The more of them that arrived, the harder his life became. An increasing number of people were trying to order him around, and he still had the problem of protecting Gaton's wealth. Although nobody had the guts to break into Gaton's own room yet, semi-public places like the library, laboratory, and parlour had been infiltrated by wandering relatives. They were 'losing' items much more often than normal.

As the steward hurried past the castle, a servant suddenly ran over to him while out of breath, "Steward! There's a magical message from the Deepblue. Without the Lord here, only you can receive it."

The old steward was stunned, quickly following the servant down to the castle's basement. Gaton's personal guards were still around here, it was one of the most central regions of the castle. The old man entered the area, steadying his breathing and standing firm before he pushed open the door that was engraved with a transmission array that could cover great distances.

Once he entered, the old steward immediately saw a grey dwarf floating in mid-air, reading what seemed to be a heavy tome. This was a magical image, not the person himself. As someone who once dealt with everyday matters concerning the Deepblue in Gaton's

place, he recognised the financial officer who worked for Sharon.

Upon seeing the old steward, the grey dwarf jumped up and yelled, “You came so slowly! You know how much it costs to keep a communication channel up over such a long distance? We’re even transmitting images, I’m burning gold by the second!”

The old steward smiled wryly, he was just a normal person who was not even level 10, and an old man at that. He was already out of breath running down to this place, how could he have come faster?

Blackgold had already grown impatient, not waiting for an answer before he followed up, “Hurry up and get ready, I’m sending things over right away! These are all to be reserved for Richard, no one else is allowed to use them! There are a lot of things, don’t you get confused.”

The magic circle slowly lit up, emitting waves of mana as packages, boxes, and specially sealed magic chests were sent over one after the other. The old steward moved about in a flurry, shifting them out of the circle so the next items could be sent over.

New items were continuously sent over on the magic circle with no end in sight, causing the old steward to break out in sweat from the exhaustion. The items weren’t too heavy, but it was incredibly taxing for him to bend over constantly. By the time the transmission ended, the pile of items next to him was almost as tall as himself.

“Transmission complete! Let me reiterate, this is all prepared for Richard!” Blackgold said with a sharp voice, immediately cutting off the communication. He wasn’t willing to waste a single second longer on such an expensive task.

The steward immediately began to carefully organise the items that were sent over. Fortunately, most were properly packaged and looked like they could be kept for a long time; nobody knew when Richard would return. On every item was a set of instructions

explaining its type, quantity, preservation method, and so on.

The more the old steward read, the more shocked he was. He could be considered experienced and knowledgeable, and he realised that these were all offerings that could be taken to the Church of the Eternal Dragon! No matter the quality, offerings were offerings. They could not be bought with gold as one pleased, nor were they something the average noble could even think about. Every single item felt scaldingly hot in the steward's hands.

The old steward took a few hours to organise all the offerings and register them in a list. The list was so long it dazzled him, and he could barely breathe. He steadied his mind before calling in a few of Gaton's trusted personal guards to bring them all to a special storeroom and seal them. Done with that, he brought the list with him and moved to the upper floors of the castle.

As he passed by a flight of stairs, he saw a girl suddenly hurry over. Her head held low, she almost bumped into the old steward. She immediately straightened up, falling into a panic the moment he saw his face, "Sorry! I'm sorry!"

The steward remembered that this was the partner Richard had chosen, Coco. He gave way with a smile, and she immediately left in a hurry. She was clearly flustered, but with the list burning in his mind the eyes that never missed a single detail didn't notice how strange she was acting.

He returned to his room and carefully hid the list before leaving in a hurry. There were just far too many things for him to do on this island. Gaton's— no, Richard's wealth had now increased a thousand-fold, and the responsibility of protecting it all fell on his old shoulders. It was such a heavy burden that his ramrod back was starting to hunch.

Without any ferocious hounds to guard it, a piece of fresh meat would always attract vicious wolves. This time, the wolves were already circling around. The old steward didn't know that the

contents of the list had ended up in someone's hands the very next day, quickly spreading across the entire upper class of Faust. Outside of some of the more powerful families, any who saw the list were unable to remain calm. This was especially true of people like the Schumpeters and Josephs who had used up almost all their resources.

Still, no matter how much a powerful family had declined it would still exercise patience and only move after it acquired intelligence and came up with a plot. However, the Archeron branch families were nothing of the like. Always fickle and impatient, they were especially proactive now that they saw a chance.

It wasn't long before some of the Archerons had found all sorts of excuses to talk to the old steward, trying to find ways to hear about the offerings. The man was incredibly tough, sending all of them back. He dismissed a few of the servants he suspected of betrayal, but couldn't touch Gaton's personal guard. They had no problems when it came to loyalty when Gaton was present, but without their master there who could vouch for their honour in the face of great benefits?

Things calmed down on the surface, but this was only the beginning of a larger wave. The steward was relying on Gaton's remaining forces to stay put, but as the days passed without news of him that power would only wane.

And thus, the people on the island were all a little agitated, just each with different reasons.

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As day turned to night once more, Coco quietly left her residence. Borrowing the darkness of the night as a cover, she arrived at a small forest next to the castle. This place was hidden in the shadow of the castle, and outside of an area with some miscellaneous trees that led to a steep cliff coming from the family volcano, there was

nothing else. Not even the nightly patrols would come here; it was rather well-hidden.

A young man was already waiting in the forest. Seeing her rush over, he immediately beckoned to her and said excitedly, “You’re finally here!”

Coco’s struggle showed on her face. She spoke with hesitation, “But I... I shouldn’t be here. I... I’m Richard’s partner after all.”

This was the young knight that Richard had seen twice before. In the scant few months, his aura had clearly grown stronger. He took a step forward and grabbed Coco’s shoulders with force, saying in a low voice, “Coco. Look at me! I’m already an official knight now, and I can even equip three runes! I’m still young, and have place to grow. It won’t be too long before I can equip another and become a real rune knight!”



## Book 3, Chapter 10 - Ugliness

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“But...” Coco was still cowering, not knowing what to say. Richard’s words and icy gaze were still deeply imprinted in her mind, as clear as if it had just been yesterday. It left her scared, terrified. She had no idea what would happen if he discovered her crossing his bottom line.

“Coco! I know what you’re worried about. It’s Richard, isn’t it?!” the youth grew more and more agitated, puffing out his chest, “How does he matter? What’s so good about him? He just has a great father, only a bastard son between Gaton and some random bitch. Why hadn’t we heard of him for ten whole years? His father is a Marquess, so they made some sacrifices to the Eternal Dragon. If not for that, how would he have become a runemaster? He isn’t even a level 10 mage! I can kill someone like him with a single strike! If he’s been on the island for so long, why hasn’t he made a rune in all this time?”

“No, Richard is...” Coco had once been Richard’s assistant, and had some knowledge of magic. While she had no clue about how far Richard had come as a runemaster, he most definitely wasn’t anything like what the youth was saying.

“Come with me!” the youth interrupted emotionally. He didn’t pay any heed to the weak rebuttal, completely immersed in his own thoughts.

The cool night breeze blew through the forest, causing Coco to tremble in the cold. She thought of the consequences of Richard finding out and took a step backwards, speaking quietly, “Erwin, it won’t work. I’m the partner Richard chose. We can’t go against the family!”

“How about this...” Erwin settled for the next best thing, “bear my child, in secret!”

Coco considered it seriously for a moment, but then remembered

something else and shook her head, “No. He hasn't touched me.. If we do that, he'll definitely notice! How about waiting till—”

Erwin made a sound of understanding, both delighted and shocked as he grabbed her, “He really hasn't touched you?”

“Yes.” The pressure on her shoulders suddenly increased. Coco had a bad feeling and began to tremble, fear creeping into her gaze.

“Then give yourself to me!” Erwin suddenly pounced over, holding her in his arms!

“No, Richard will kill us!” Coco did all she could to resist, her voice raising an entire octave. However, Erwin only turned a deaf ear as his hands grew more fierce and his breathing urgent. The moment he touched her supple, energetic body, it was as though his entire being was ignited; he no longer cared about the consequences. He wasn't an Archeron anyway, only a part of a branch family through marriage. Strictly speaking, he wasn't even a vassal. Now that he had the potential to become a rune knight, he would get a fairly good position in any family.

Coco was merely a level 2 illusionist. Although she was stronger than most girls, that was not a match for Erwin. It took a short struggle for him to press her down on an empty area, her clothing unable to restrict his strong hands.

Hurriedly removing everything in his way, Erwin started panting, “What is Richard anyway? He's already lost in some random plane, and definitely won't be coming back! His bones have probably turned to ash already! Who'll know about what happens between us? His damned father is already trapped by the Mensas too, and won't be coming back! All the Archerons he bullied have allied in secret, and are preparing to chase his family off the island! You have no idea how many offerings he's kept in secret. As long as we get them, we'll be able to perform ceremonies at the Church of the Eternal Dragon. When the time comes, we'll become legendary beings! Who cares about Gatton?!”

“No! We’ll all die!” Coco’s voice gradually got louder. She did love Erwin, but no matter how weak she was, she was still an Archeron. Someone like her could not handle the consequences of what was happening right now. Both Gaton and Richard gave off a similar feeling. They were taciturn volcanoes; once they erupted, they were unstoppable.

However, Erwin steeled his heart and continued. Coco’s purity had caused many of his worries over the past few days to ease, and he decided to grab this gift from fate...

A few coughs suddenly sounded out from outside the forest, scaring Erwin. The youth jumped up from his position over Coco.

The old steward’s voice sounded from outside, “It’s already so late, who’s inside?”

Coco tried to calm herself, trying her best to make her voice seem normal, “It’s me, Sir, Coco.”

Erwin gave Coco a long look and retreated, silently disappearing into the depths of the forest. For her part she quickly tidied up, steadily walking out of the forest to stand in front of the steward.

“It’s already so late, what are you doing here?” the old man asked sternly. His eyes were focused on her own, not flitting across the telling signs on her clothes.

“Richard... hasn’t been back for a long time. I was worried and couldn’t sleep, so I took a walk,” Coco lowered her head and said softly. In that instant, even she believed these words. Under immense pressure, women always performed better than usual.

The old butler nodded, his expression growing tender, “Have patience, Coco. Master and Young Master aren’t ordinary people. They can make all sorts of miracles happen. Don’t forget— the Archerons are in their place today because of Master Gaton’s work. Besides, you’re an Archeron yourself; you should know full well the repercussions for infuriating them. The rage of the Archerons

will burn the blood of generations of our enemies to ashes!”

“I remember,” Coco answered gently.

The old butler nodded, leaving with his hands behind his back. Coco heaved a long sigh, but then she suddenly realised the meaning of his latter words. She broke out in a cold sweat as she took a look around the dark forest, growing increasingly afraid before she ran off while holding her skirt.

Ten days later, another meeting was called in the castle of the floating island.

Gaton had been trapped for half a month, and there had been no news at all. This wasn't too long, but it wasn't too short either. It was enough people for certain people with certain intentions to change their minds. They shifted from 'what's going to happen when Gaton's back?' to 'so what if he comes back?'. This should have taken much longer, but the temptation of the offerings had sped it up several dozen times.

## Book 3, Chapter 11 - Ugliness(2)

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The steward was sat at the head of the long table. With Gaton's children not completely grown, he had complete authority on Gaton's behalf. However, he felt incomparably isolated from the rest of the meeting despite being the host. Everyone around him was an aristocrat; even the representatives were at least titled knights. In fact, many of the minor branches had simply set their branch heads to the meeting.

The topic of this meeting was inconceivable. The branch families were asking whether they could 'lend' some offerings to them so they could enjoy the Eternal Dragon's favour and develop rapidly as well.

Lending was an easy thing to do, but how would they get it back? The old steward sat perfectly upright, his gaze sweeping past everyone present. Outside of Sauron, Goliath, and Alice, which one of these branches was capable of returning even the lowest grade of offering?

It was Gaton who had made his way into Faust in an unyielding manner, carrying the Archeron name into the city of miracles. Most of these people here normally wouldn't have the right to even take a step in. Even if Sauron and Goliath wanted to offer sacrifices, they had to go through one of the families of Faust, paying a hefty sum.

The proposal and agreement came from all the small branches. The representatives of Sauron, Goliath, and Alice kept somewhat silent.

For once, the branch families were being smart. None of them asked for the opinions of the three most formidable families. At this crucial juncture, they were far too small and weak, destined to dash ahead and act as cannon fodder. This was the only way they could get a share, although it would be minuscule compared to

what the three would take away. It was foolish to try and involve them in this mess during the tentative period, and fools never lived long enough to ascend to high positions.

“We’re only borrowing a small part. Once we receive divine grace and grow stronger, we will naturally return them!”

“Exactly! We swear on the Archeron bloodline!”

“Don’t tell me that if those two never come back, we’ll leave the offerings until they become mouldy? It’s only worth it with an instant conversion to power!”

The clamour in the hall was getting louder by the minute, and more people were getting worked up. A few of the perpetrators had already started discussing the allocation.

Looking at the situation about to fall out of control, the steward finally coughed a few times before speaking up in a low voice, “I need to remind you that these offerings all came from the Deepblue, and Her Excellency Sharon clearly stated that they were exclusively for Richard’s use. Strictly speaking, they do not belong to the Archeron Family. If we use them inappropriately without permission, we might enrage Her Excellency.”

This silenced the hall. Many people looked at each other with dismay, lost for words. Sharon’s glory was not empty talk; no matter how hot-headed and arrogant these idiots got, they would know better than to provoke a legendary mage. This was particularly so when they didn’t have any noble cause or status.

However, the silence was cut short by a middle-aged man, “What proof do you have that this batch is intended for Richard? Even if they came from the Deepblue, she might have just gifted it to the entire family!”

“Yes, yes! Besides, it’s already confirmed that Richard is lost in the streams of time. It’s certain— uh... It’s not known when he can come back. Since that is the case, even if they belonged to him

initially they should fall to all of the Archerons! We are all part of the same family, so we should naturally get a share!”

The voices of agreement started to resound through the hall as everyone began to sound more and more confident.

The old butler sighed, “I think it’s better to wait for Master Gatton to return before discussing this again.”

“You think?” a young and arrogant man yelled with disdain all over his face, “You are nothing but a servant. What right do you have to speak here? This is a hall where the Archeron Family discusses official matters. Do you have any Archeron blood in you?”

“Precisely! You just have to act in accordance with our decisions!”

The clamour grew more intense as the people creating the commotion became more active. In any case, they were already being offensive; they simply couldn’t care less as they outrageously tried to force the steward to abdicate. Compared to offending Gatton, whose life and death was uncertain, an opportunity to offer a sacrifice was clearly much more precious. To these small branch families, it was practically nirvana, a rebirth!

Although they had never offered any sacrifices before, they had heard countless legends about the grace of the Eternal Dragon, like a forbidden fruit in the heavens that gave off a captivating scent. They felt like a single bite would transform them entirely, bringing them to the legendary realm.

THUMP!

The steward pounded on the table, rendering everyone silent for a moment!

The old man was no powerhouse. Many of the people present could easily inflict serious injuries with a single blow. He had no glorious achievements either; more than sixty years of his life were

spent on handling all sorts of trivial matters for the Archerons in the background. The only reason he could sit here was the trust and authority that Gaton had left him with.

And yet, everyone could see a trace of Gaton's presence in the man. He was majestic and explosive, like an erupting volcano! For just that moment, everyone who was making a racket fell silent.

His gaze swept past the few people who were clamouring the most, and he snorted before speaking loudly, "YOU LOT DESERVE TO BE CALLED ARCHERONS TOO?!"

"You!" As his gaze swept past them, they subconsciously shrunk into their seats. It took a second for their reactions to catch up as they leapt up and roared in humiliated rage, "HOW DARE YOU INSULT THE NOBLE ARCHERONS?"

The old butler didn't bother about their roars, only declaring in a low and resolute voice, "I don't care where you got the news about this batch of offerings from, but I'm going to clarify this for the last time. These offerings are for Young Master Richard. Anyone who wants to take them away needs to bring an army!"

This was no different from a declaration of war. Gaton had left behind quite a number of guards on the floating island, as well as a bunch of knights some of whom were rune knights in training. However, most of the latter came from the various branches, making their loyalty questionable. The only ones the steward could rely on were the personal guards Gaton had trained himself. No matter what it was, nothing could change their passive position due to the lack of elite soldiers.

There had been no point in leaving any of his thirteen to keep watch on the island, so Gaton had brought everyone he could to the expedition. The castle here didn't have too many valuable items. Anyway, should anyone dare to attack it, they would be exterminated the moment Gaton and his troops returned.

The hall grew quiet once more. The greed in the air had not



completely drowned out the rationality of the branches. The trauma Gaton had left in their minds was not something that could be eliminated in a scant two weeks.

Many gazes turned towards the representatives of Sauron, Goliath, and Alice. Judging from the current situation, only these three held the authority to resolve their problem. No matter how bold and audacious these branch families grew, they wouldn't dare to be so brazen as to attack Gaton's personal guards if they didn't have a backer. Should the attack fail, they would face an imminent disaster that would wipe out their entire family.

Baron Sua lowered his head, focused on wiping the dagger sheath in his hand. It was as though this situation had nothing to do with him. However, careful observation would reveal a trace of disdain in his eyes.

The representatives of Goliath and Alice didn't utter a word either. It was as though this entire matter was completely irrelevant to them, but they didn't mask their haughtiness either. In their eyes, these so-called Archerons in the hall were just a group of monkeys. True Archerons were haughty, crude, and arrogant lunatics that were on planar expeditions everywhere. They used blood and sword to fight for survival, opening up new horizons instead of using words and conspiracy.

Still, if Gaton really couldn't return or the situation went out of control, they wouldn't mind 'borrowing' some strategic resources for the time being either. This group of monkeys could still serve as cannon fodder then. However, it was still far from the time to disregard it all now.

Without any of the three declaring a position, the clamouring people did not know how to conclude things. The meeting thus ended hastily, and as they left the conference hall the old steward stood taller and straighter than everyone else.

However, this was merely the beginning. The monkeys still hung

around the floating island; Gaton had once passed down an order that opened many of the facilities on the island to the branches. As such, the steward had no way to chase them away either.

As time passed, battles continued to erupt over trivial matters. The monkeys tried to display a sense of superiority on many occasions, retaliating against the judgement the steward had passed on them. However, the sentence the old man had uttered during the meeting circulated very quickly.

You lot deserve to be called Archerons too?!

More and more Archerons were starting to appear on the island. They carried an aura of blood and fire, with countless scars on their body and an indescribable savagery in their eyes. The weapons and attire made it obvious they came from different places; subterranean worlds, fields of lava, and sheets of polar ice. No matter where they came from or what level they were at, they had a common trait: their very presence reeked of danger. There weren't many of them, but put together they could fight thousands of cavalrymen!

Once they arrived at the island, they lived in the most dilapidated of places. They didn't mind what they ate, as long as it filled their stomachs. Normally only found at training arenas or on patrol, they spent their lives resting, guarding, and training. They seemed like they had nothing to do, no goal in mind.

Nobody outside of the old steward could command them.

These truly were some vicious beasts. They were also from the various branches of the Archeron Family, and they called themselves Archerons as well. They rushed over from all kinds of places without any summon or command. Individually they were mere drops of water, but together they became a torrential current!

In front of them, even the 'dignified' monkeys chose to take the long route.

They, they were the true Archerons.

## Book 3, Chapter 12 - Knight

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A group of strange people entered the Eternal Plains in autumn, stepping on the road to Faust. Their carriages were bright and colourful, the guards mostly barbarians warriors. Amongst them was a small group of knights in extremely beautiful armour, their sigil a tree branch bent into a ring. The maple knights of the Millennial Empire were one of the three largest knight legions tasked with guarding the imperial capital, and had a great reputation on the continent.

As they stepped onto the Eternal Plains, the barbarian warrior at the helm of the group, at least a head taller than the next largest man, used the extended field of view of the plateau to follow the road up Miracle Peak to the City of Legends, Faust.

This was Steelrock, Mountainsea's closest guard. His brutal aura had faded from his last visit to Norland, replaced by the desolate sense of distance of Klandor. He stared at the City of Legends for a whole three minutes before nodding hard, "This is more like it!"

When they reached the base of the mountain, the caravan was stopped at the checkpoint. When the soldiers on guard were looking over the documents as per regulation, a patrolling group rushed over from the side. Their leader was a rune knight! Only Faust was so luxurious that even the patrol team leaders were full rune knights.

The soldiers stopped before the caravan and pointed to the large wagons, asking coldly, "What's inside?"

One of the barbarians spoke up, "The skeleton of an ancient beast, for young master Richard of the Archeron Family."

"An offering?!" the rune knight shouted reflexively out of shock. Countless ideas started to pass through his mind; these wagons before him were worth more than their weight in gold! He made up his mind incredibly quickly as well, immediately waving at the

knights behind him as he shouted, “These people could be spies! Take them to the back, the items on the wagon should be inspected carefully!”

The rune knight’s words left the barbarians both shocked and angry. However, those who were familiar with Faust’s recent circumstances clearly understood the unspoken meaning behind those words. The patrolling of Faust’s surroundings was always undertaken by the powerful families in turn.

This rune knight was from the Joseph Family, who were already arch-enemies with the Archerons. The barbarian warrior had casually revealed that the wagons were delivering ancient beast skeletons that could be used as an offering, and it was even for Richard. Unfortunately, with Gaton trapped on another plane, island 7-2 was currently at its emptiest. Because of that, the rune knight made the decision to seize them by force. He even felt proud of his determination and quick thinking.

They were just a group of barbarians, what could they do in Faust?

The moment the rune knight gave the command, the knights behind him swarmed forth with the intention of surrounding the caravan and taking the precious wagons. However, what happened afterwards wasn’t as beautiful as the knight imagined. The first few that went forward were all flung back much faster than their charge, as if they were flies being swatted away. A huge, strong body appeared before the rune knight, a scarlet pattern drawn across his bare chest. Outside of a beast-tooth necklace hung around his neck, there wasn’t even a single weapon or accessory on his body.

A single sweep of Steelrock’s arm had sent all the knights before him flying.

The rune knight’s eyes narrowed. This barbarian in front of him struck fear in his heart, but he couldn’t feel any kind of powerful

energy or aura from the man's body. It seemed like the fellow relied purely on natural strength. With the blood of wild beasts flowing through the barbarian tribes, this was a common thing that was not worth fearing.

Seeing the second wave of knights also getting thrown out by the man, the rune knight rushed up hot-bloodedly, roaring in anger, "You dare behave in such an atrocious manner under the city of Faust? Send the alert!"

A blood-red flare flew into the sky, letting out an ear-piercing whistle. The rune knights on duty from the Joseph Family would rush over immediately, their leader a saint!

The rune knight stared at the barbarians before him with a sneer. In his eyes, these savages were as good as dead. However, he suddenly frowned when he saw that exceptionally large warrior; that man's prideful gaze was untameable, with even some contempt within. It was as if he felt like the signal for help was incredibly disdainful.

The rune knight's eye twitched, seeing red in an instant. He did not like others being arrogant before him, and now he didn't care about hiding his intent to annihilate the caravan! Letting go of the mask, he spurred on his horse and activated all his runes. Rushing up to Steelrock in a flash, he slashed down with a huge sword that weighed a few hundred kilograms!

"Do you want to die?" The look in Steelrock's eyes suddenly changed, growing fierce and terrifying like a wild beast. He actually laughed in the face of the crazed rune knight that was charging towards him, his mighty aura becoming a tornado that surged into the sky as the ground beneath his feet cracked apart in an instant!

The barbarian raised his thick leg, simply kicking the knight's warhorse in the chest. The creature's abdomen immediately sunk in, its neck twisted unnaturally as it flew back from whence it

came. A single kick had stopped a rune knight's wild charge!

Blood suddenly sprayed out from the rune knight's visor, his heavily armoured body flying off the horse. Still, he was a master amongst knights, not admitting defeat so easily. Regaining control of his body in mid-air, he twirled his huge sword around to strike towards Steelrock.

Steelrock remained standing in the same spot, only sending a punch forwards. His huge right fist landed firmly on the rune knight's body, and after an ear-piercing sound of metal twisting the entirety of his armour was left unrecognisable. The man flew out over ten metres, falling with a plop before rolling another ten. Fresh blood spurted out of the cracks in a torrent; one look would be enough to know he was deader than dead.

Steelrock's simple moves that had eliminated their captain shook all the patrolling knights. His grand aura startled the warhorses, forcing the weaker ones to their knees.

Steelrock looked around with a sneer, shouting, "You lot dare steal Mountainsea's gifts? You have guts!"

An angry shout suddenly rang out from afar, "Mountainsea? What is that? You wild dogs, you lot will die here today!"

An entire squad of rune knights sped over from a kilometres away, the iron hooves of their mounts kicking up a storm of dust no less than would come from an entire company of heavy cavalry. In fact, their power was only greater than a well-equipped company! At the head of the squad, a horse flew across the plains like it was walking on the wind. The knight atop it was emitting a powerful aura that made it seem like flames were raging all over his body. This was clearly a saint powerhouse! Steelrock's gaze turned cold. He suddenly restrained his aura, the earth-shattering pressure disappearing without a trace as he strode forward, the huge body seemingly losing weight and growing agile.

However, he had taken only a single step before a hand stopped

him.

This was one of the maple knights, only different from his comrades in that he had two swords crossed on his back instead of one. He had the figure of the average man, but he still quietly stopped Steelrock with that single hand. “You’re too brutal, let me do it.”

Steelrock grew angry at that, “Why? Are we barbarians even afraid of them?”

The knight shook his head, “No, but if you do it your way it will bring Richard a lot of unnecessary trouble.”

Steelrock hesitated for a moment, but then he nodded, “Alright! You lot on the mainland have a bunch of strange rules. But don’t you forget, he insulted Her Excellency Mountainsea!”

The knight nodded in response, “I understand.”

He then strode forward, stopping before the charging formation of rune knights. He was still stood casually, but a sharp aura suddenly rose towards the sky. The knight’s entire person seemed like an unsheathed sword, one of his blades leaving its sheath on its own to fall into his hands. A blinding flash enveloped the entire area, the watery light from the sword instantly dazzling everyone!

The saint powerhouse was inconsolably terrified, the green pike in his hands stabbing forth in desperation. A light screech rang out as the weapon was reduced to pieces, the sword light swallowing him whole! The saint suddenly felt much lighter, starting to float where he stood. He then saw the knight appear in front of his subordinates and leisurely walk past them. The sword in his hands could no longer be seen, only a light so bright that one could not look at it directly.

The rune knights maintained their charging position, but their actions were slow as a snail. Even after the maple knight had returned to his original position, they still hadn’t even advanced



the length of a horse.

For a second the world went incomparably quiet, leaving the saint unable to hear a single thing. A moment later, countless sounds swarmed his ears. It was only then that he realised he had flown up high and was falling quickly, soon being planted into the ground!

The other rune knights were flipped over as well, all falling off their horses. The beasts whinnied and jumped a few times on the spot before falling as well, dead within the blink of an eye. The rune knights could still struggle a little, but not one of them could immediately stand up.

The saint finally struggled up, feeling a wave of dizziness. However, he discovered that his right hand did not get up with the rest of him. Forcing himself steady, he looked back at the ground only for his vision to black out. The knight had already cut off his right arm!

“You... You...” the saint pointed a trembling hand at the knight, but he couldn’t say a thing.

The maple knight spoke indifferently, “Since when is the Joseph Family so aggressive and shameless that you’re robbing people under Faust’s nose?”

## Book 3, Chapter 13 - Retreat

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The saint glared at the maple knight, fire almost spewing out of his eyes. The severed right arm hadn't been shattered—he could get it fixed back in the Church of the Eternal Dragon—but it had still caused irreversible damage. It would take a long time before he could return to his former capacity.

A loud, clear sound rang out from above them at that moment, “I guess even the Joseph Family is inferior to the Millennial Empire when it comes to arrogance?”

The knight raised his head towards the source of the sound, only to see a griffin diving down at breakneck speed. It covered the hundred or so metres to the ground in an instant, landing in front of him like a meteor.

A middle-aged man with a strong aura appeared before the maple knight. His hair, still flying from the impact, was an eerie lilac, the killing intent so strong that it materialised into numerous violet runes that floated around his body.

He took a mere three steps towards the knight, the purple aura expanding with every foot forward until it was a ten-metre tall pillar of fire!

Anyone could guess that this man was Earl Sully of the Joseph Family, a well-known level 20 powerhouse!

Still, the maple knight was unperturbed as he asked with indifference, “What are you doing here? Trying to rob an offering given to Richard Archeron by Her Excellency Mountainsea? Are you trying to wage war with the Millennial Empire?”

Sully stared at the knight for a good while. The colour drained from his face, but he still sneered, “Ah, Mr. Drakons! Am I seeing things? The commander of the maple knights is now a little guard that's sneaked his way to Faust?”

Drakons smiled, "If I hadn't come, then this skeleton would already be in your hands."

Steelrock huffed unhappily, but didn't say anything. Still, his implication was clear; nobody could have taken these things away even if Drakons hadn't been here.

"Ancient beast skeleton!" Sully's shock was apparent in his high-pitched voice. His gaze grew piercing, energy surging as he shouted, "Isn't Mountainsea the ruler of the barbarians? What does she have to do with the Millennial Empire?"

Drakons replied calmly, "Her Excellency is the granddaughter of the Empress, and a student of my master the Sword Saint. Of course she's related to the Empire. Or have you been in Faust so long that you're completely clueless about the continent at large?"

Sully's face dropped at the mentioned of the Sword Saint. "Regardless," he said through clenched teeth, "I'll have to get my hands on that thing!"

Steelrock scoffed coldly and took one foot forward, about to walk towards Sully. But just as he raised his leg, he was quickly pulled back again. "This is my affair now," Drakons stated.

One hand on Steelrock, Drakons' eyes grew clouded and he asked Sully, "You want the skeleton? Sure. All you need to do is kill me."

Sully laughed out loud as the purple energy around him condensed into an axe. "We're both level 20 beings. You think you can defeat me just because you have the Sword Saint for a master?"

His words enraged Steelrock once more. The barbarian clenched his fists so hard his knuckles popped loudly, his face a smile filled with malice, "Where did this idiot come from? I promise: 3 minutes with him and I'll have him begging for mercy!"

Drakons held out his arm to block Steelrock; even without making any direct contact, he still managed to stop the furious barbarian from acting. His swords did not leave their sheaths on

their own this time. He instead grabbed them by the hilt, slowly drawing them out. The half-drawn blades shone so brightly in the light of the setting sun it was impossible to tell their material.

He glared coldly at the Earl, “We’re both level 20? Great. Take ten attacks from me without dying, and I’ll let you off.”

All colour drained from Sully’s face as his hand around his axe trembled profusely. He knew full well that the moment both those swords left their sheaths, Drakons would fight to his full abilities.

Alas. The swords left their sheaths slowly, the blades vibrating in the process to create a draconic roar that only got louder with time. By the time they were finally out, Sully let out a scream and turned around. His hazy purple energy shrouded the saint and all the rune knights as he made a beeline for the Josephs’ floating island.

“Drakons! I’m not scared of you, just showing some respect for the Sword Saint!” the earl’s voice echoed from afar.

Drakons scoffed, returning his blades to their sheaths.

Steelrock was irritated that he didn’t get to have the fight he wanted and spat hatefully, “Why did that bastard run?”

Drakons had already returned to his non-threatening demeanour. With his mask pulled back up, he looked just like an ordinary maple knight. He laughed lightly at Steelrock’s complaint, “The Josephs are at fault this time. If this sparks a war with the Empire, the Sacred Emperor wouldn’t let him off. On the other hand, even if I did kill him it wouldn’t be of any significance. He came with such gusto but didn’t expect to be embarrassed by me. Naturally, he went running back in shame. Of course the word will spread through high society; the Joseph Family has completely humiliated itself this time.”

Steelrock profusely nodded in enlightenment, “They dug their own graves. But they insulted Her Excellency! This embarrassment

isn't enough to teach them a lesson, I'll come back to the Sacred Alliance with an army from Klandor..."

Drakons was rather speechless at that. "Trust me, the punishment I gave them is far more than sufficient."

Steelrock stared at Drakons for a while, only nodding hesitantly after he remembered the severely injured saint and rune knights just now.

The journey continued in spite of the of the unforeseen incident, no more fools trying to disturb the trip. The skeletons thus ultimately made their way to the old steward, rendering the atmosphere in the Archeron island even tenser than before.

The ancient beast skeleton was on the same level as a dragon's skeleton; it was worth at least one intermediate sacrifice.

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An angry growl rang throughout the Josephs' island when the skeleton entered Archeron hands. "Bastard! This cruel bastard!"

Drakons was cruel, indeed. All ten of the rune knights' mounts had been killed, and he had completely destroyed one of the runes on each of their bodies. This dropped the entire squad's power by at least a third; they were a lost cause.

Sully was fuming, but he had no plans for revenge. He may be level 20, but he had no hopes of becoming a legendary being. He knew his place, and the confrontation with Drakons taught him that even people at the same level could differ drastically in power.

Sully was clear about something else as well. Even if he had been the stronger one today, he couldn't have touched Drakons. Unless, of course, he planned to stay in Faust for the rest of his life to avoid the Sword Saint's vengeance.

Moreover, if the protector of the Sacred Alliance found out about this, she would likely join the Sword Saint in chasing him down instead of stopping him.

## Book 3, Chapter 14 - Unable To Refuse

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Steelrock and Drakons didn't stay around too long after handing the skeletal remains to the Archeron steward. After a quick tour of the island, they left with their entourage. When they reached the entrance of Faust, Steelrock looked up at the dragon head hung from the arched gates, praising, "This is a good thing!"

"Only those without much history will exemplify their glory so conspicuously," Drakons said with some disdain.

Steelrock turned to glance at the maple knight, "You people have this kinda stuff in your kingdom?"

"The Millennial Empire is an inheritor of the ancient elven empires," Drakons answered proudly, "The ruler of every generation is well-known for their strength on the mainland. The empire is filled with powerhouses, and there are eight or ten such things in our treasury!"

Steelrock nodded his head, his eyes glowing, but one couldn't tell what exactly he was thinking about.

Done boasting, Drakons gazed at the barbarian, "You've seen the situation of the Archeron Family. If Gaton cannot return soon, the skeletal remains will likely only bring them more trouble. Listen to my advice, leave it with Duke Peron for now. His family occupies island 6-4, and is much stronger than the Joseph Family. He's also my master's uncle, so you don't have to worry about him losing or damaging the offering. He doesn't care much about these things."

The barbarian shook his head, "I'm not worried about the skeleton. If it's gone, it's gone. We have an entire valley full of those things in our tribe! Any trouble it causes is the Archerons' business, my only job was to send this thing over. With it delivered, I'm done."

Drakons frowned, "Say Richard returns all of a sudden, and

Gaton is still in the other plane. These remains alone will cause a great deal of trouble for him!”

Steelrock snorted, murderous intent in his eyes, “Can’t the man fancied by Her Highness deal with this tiny problem? It wouldn’t be bad if he died here, there are lots of warriors back in Klandor who want to slaughter him. If he doesn’t have the ability, it’s better if he dies now instead of embarrassing Mountainsea.”

Drakons’ expression changed at that statement. “The man fancied by Her Highness...” he muttered as he shook his head, leaving alongside Steelrock. The two walked out side by side, a vast disparity in their sizes but no difference in strength.

“Drakons!”

“Hmm?”

“Let’s have a fight before we part! I haven’t had a good fight in months!”

Darkons let out a cold snort, “When my two swords leave their sheath, they are bound to draw blood!”

“Really?” there was an air of excitement in Steelrock’s voice.

The maple knight’s aura completely dissipated, and he said helplessly, “You warriors of Klandor really have no humour.”

Steelrock was rendered speechless for a moment, but then he said through clenched teeth, “You warriors of Norland really aren’t funny.”

The two gradually parted ways.

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For his part, Richard didn’t know of all the troubles he had accumulated in Norland. He was busy dealing with his problems back in Faelor.

Blackwing had never shown himself ever since the assassination, and that frightening unknown archer had disappeared completely

as well. Richard had launched his revenge against Red Cossack the very next day, arresting everyone associated with the group in Bluewater and turning them into slaves. Any who resisted were killed on the spot, hung on wooden stakes and displayed publicly outside the oasis.

The violent reaction was tantamount to a loud slap on Red Cossack's face; it wouldn't be long before they struck once more. Of course, that was exactly what Richard wanted; angry people always committed unwise mistakes.

He didn't forget the power of gold, something that had an irresistible attraction in the mortal world. Using the Golden Warflag and various other organisations and merchant groups operating in Bluewater, he posted an amazing reward for Red Cossack. He offered more than a hundred gold coins for every level 5 warrior, the reward increasing with level. The two saints were put up at 100,000 coins! It had changed every gaze on the two saints, and the perception of saints was very sharp.

Money was the thing Richard lacked the least. As long as the pen in his hand could still move, he had near unlimited gold. Although he didn't have enough to pay for all of the bounties, the possibility of the heads of saints being bought with gold was minuscule.

One hot and stuffy night, Rolf arrived at Richard's residence. They had agreed on the date in prior meetings, and he was excited as this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to acquire the power of someone at a higher level.

The saint swordsman stood in the courtyard, waiting for Richard's guard to go make a report. His status meant he rarely had to wait at someone's door in recent years, but ahead of him was the workshop of a great mage. It was also the opportunity for him to obtain a second rune, two chances to defeat enemies stronger than him. There was no sense of impatience in him at all. Although his breathing grew a little hurried moments before he reached for the door.



Even saints would be humbled in the face of power. Rolf finally contained his nervousness, mustering the courage to knock.

“Lord Rolf, please enter!” a voice came from inside.

The first thing the saint did upon entering was to size up Richard’s workshop. It looked like a mage’s lab, but without much of the larger research equipment. Richard himself was sat at a table, studying two pieces of paper. He didn’t raise his head even when Rolf came in, “Please take a seat and wait a moment, I need to finish reading these things.”

Rolf was in no hurry, sitting down calmly. He had remained at level 16 for seven years now, so a few more minutes would not matter. It took a while for Richard to finish reading, after which the mage stood up and stretched his body. He then smiled and explained, “I was looking at information on the Red Cossack saints and had some ideas. Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“It doesn’t matter! I can wait!” Rolf answered a little too quickly, his voice reverberating through the room. He took a glance at the information in Richard’s hands and asked, “Chuck and Phinbar? I’ve dealt with them a few times, and well... I’m not afraid of you laughing, Master Richard. Phinbar has defeated me once before, and I’m afraid the gap between us has only grown since then.”

For the sake of the formidable power he was about to obtain, Rolf had even changed from calling Richard mister to master. The power of runes had made him neglect Richard’s age.

The Sword Saint had learnt from Amon that the final bits of the runecrafting and activation would be undertaken by Richard himself. Given the amount of material and time spent on it, it was apparent that Richard could complete a large portion of the fabrication himself. Facing a disciple of a grand mage who could make near divine weapons, there was no such thing as too much respect.

Richard had quickly prepared his tools while Rolf was lost in

thought, taking out a magic sealing box. He carefully extracted the new rune from within, speaking indifferently, “That doesn’t matter. If you meet Phinbar after tomorrow, Lord Rolf, he will be defeated. Once he loses twice, I don’t think there’s a chance he will challenge you a third time.”

The rune started glowing a pale gold the moment it left the sealing box, overflowing with magical power. Before its magnificent radiance, Rolf could not help but hold his breath. His entire body began trembling slightly.

He had been bottlenecked for much too long, a limit brought about by his talent. Although he was unwilling to reconcile himself to that fact, Rolf still knew clearly that he had no hope of getting to level 17 even if he practised another ten years. The further up one was stopped, the more they desired greater power.

Having tasted the enormous power, wealth, and glory that came from being a saint, Rolf could not control himself. The knowledge that he could not attain higher levels only increased his desire. He would not miss any opportunity to grow!

Richard’s gaze flickered, already having captured the changes in Rolf’s expression. He realised then that he had underestimated this powerhouse’s desire for power. This was a desire that far surpassed lust or greed, a veritable drug...

Ten minutes later, a surprised and delighted voice rang out from the workshop, “This... this power! This feeling!”

“Be careful, Lord Rolf. If you truly activate the rune now, you’ll be left with only a single chance to use it.” Richard’s cold voice calmed the saint to some extent. So what if it could only be used twice? That was two chances of defeating someone of the same level, of escaping from someone more powerful. No matter how he evaluated it, this was a great deal.

Rolf stood up, pacing back and forth in the workshop. He was so agitated that he could not stop; this rune had awoken a lust for

vengeance that had been lying dormant for years. How could he not be excited at the prospect of continuing to advance? One's age and talent were not the only things limiting their advance; understanding of magic and battle experience were important aspects that were like lighthouses illuminating the correct path forward.

“Master Richard, this rune exceeds my every imagination! I'll have my people send over fifty magic crystals from my private collection, you must appreciate the token of appreciation!” Although Rolf was very excited, years of experience in politics brought him to such a decision immediately. He had to grow his relationship with Richard at all costs.

Looking at the excited man, Richard laughed and shook his head. However, just as he was about to speak, the saint interrupted him, “Respected Master Richard... I know what you are about to say. Indeed, we already have negotiated terms. This is only a small personal gift!”

Richard thought it over and took out a delicate magic sealing box, opening it to reveal a pale gold scroll. “Alright, then I shall accept your kindness. This scroll is a gift to you in return.”

## Book 3, Chapter 15 - Unable To Refuse(2)

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Rolf's senses very astute. He immediately sensed the mystic undulations of divine power from the scroll, able to tell that it contained a powerful spell. It was a privilege restricted to the larger churches, only usable if one was a follower of the god. Rolf didn't feel much of anything about the scroll itself, only unsettled by the fact that the aura being radiated by the scroll was foreign to him. He couldn't help but recall Amon's speculations of Richard being backed by a demigod.

"This is a divine scroll, I'm afraid I cannot use it."

"Grade 5 divine spell, War Construct. I'm sure you've heard of it before."

"War Construct?!" Rolf was startled. This was a powerful spell possessed by all greater churches, greatly boosting the defence, offence, and even speed and regeneration of the target greatly. The only drawback that its usefulness was limited to those of high faith, and few clerics could even learn it. Only one out of every four or five that had crossed level 12 could grasp this spell.

Although he was stunned at the rarity of the scroll, Rolf's enthusiasm dissipated completely. No matter how powerful the spell was, it was not something he could use. As for the gold he could get from selling it, it would be too small an amount for him to care.

However, Richard's next words caused the saint's powerful heart to start beating rapidly. "This scroll is somewhat special, it can be used by those without faith. The power is slightly lower than a regular one, but at critical times it can turn the tides of a battle."

Usable without faith? Rolf was surprised greatly. This was a sullied scroll! However, what did a sullied grade 5 scroll imply? A myriad of thoughts passed through Rolf's mind; the person who scribed this scroll needed to be an official priest at minimum! No

demigod could support an official priest!

Even as Rolf's mind was whirling, Richard's next words only served to agitate him further, "That's just the first level. The scroll has three levels of power, although one needs faith to activate the third."

Rolf's expression froze slightly.

Richard smiled harmlessly, as if he hadn't seen the unnatural expression on Rolf's face. He pointed at the enchanted paper underneath the scroll, "On this paper is an introduction to my Lord's doctrine, and the main tenets of His faith. If the person who uses the scroll chooses to follow them, they will immediately be able to activate the second level of power. The defensive boost will be increased, and divine power will be added to attacks. One's blows will be difficult to endure, the injuries they inflict not easily healed by the spells of other gods. The third level requires a certain amount of piety."

The Anrick Family worshipped their ancestors, meaning Rolf naturally rejected the gods. The priests he had met in the past drivelled on endlessly about the great might of their masters; never had one talked about divine power as a tool like Richard was doing. Richard was talking about weaponising the divine power within the scroll, using it to augment one's offence and defence. This was the most direct way of turning the tables in a battle!

"Then how powerful is the third level?" Rolf asked tartly.

Richard answered in such a leisurely tone that it made Rolf want to kill him, "If— and I do mean only if... If you can activate the scroll to its fullest extent, it will have two effects. The first is half a minute of Extraordinary Recovery, and the second a divine weapon in place of your own whose every attack is charged with divine power."

Rolf immediately held his breath. Extraordinary Recovery was a state akin to a healing spell being cast on one's body every second.

It basically rendered him immune to death for that half minute. As for the divine weapon, it would have power equivalent to Sinclair's dagger, completely overshadowing any weapon Rolf currently had.

The third level of War Construct would turn Rolf into an instrument of destruction! If the scroll combined with the effects of his rune, he could likely take on both Chuck and Phinbar alone. Such a divine item, such strength! Rolf's eyes blazed as he looked at the scroll, his heart surging. This was no mere grade 5 scroll—it could be considered a legendary weapon that was paid for by faith.

The Anrick Family might worship their ancestors, but Rolf wasn't the successor and a powerful swordsman on top. Although his foundation had come from the power of his bloodline, given his current strength faith had little effect on him.

It wasn't like there were no atheists in these kinds of families. Be it due to politics or other reasons, the longer the family existed the shallower the many worshippers' faith grew. Bluntly put there was little benefit to worshipping one's ancestors, and little punishment if one converted. It was mostly just a way to make one's stand known.

And yet, this did not make things easy for Rolf. The head of the family, Marquess Anrick, was his blood brother even if they were not born of the same mother. He had never imagined that there would come a day when he needed to decide between power and faith.

Richard spoke up slowly, "Of course, Lord Rolf might have no need for this toy. It wouldn't be impolite of you to just gift it to someone else."

Rolf's next breath was stuck in his throat. He decided that he would go without sleep that night, analysing all the information on that piece of paper before making any decisions.

Looking at the saint carry the magic box like it was a precious treasure, Richard smiled slightly. It was just as he had expected,

and the outcome would be just as expected as well. He was bound to meet a powerful enemy in the future, and he would need to use the scroll. Since Rolf knew of the tremendous power of the third level of the scroll, Richard did not doubt that he would be unable to hold back. There was practically no punishment for an ancestor worshipper converting as long as their changed strength did not depend on bloodline. And as it turned out, Richard knew this did not apply to the saint swordsman.

The Dragon of Eternity and Light. This title alone could hold the attention of a fair number of people. Once Rolf saw the paper, he would be astounded by the fact that such a peerless god had almost no requirements of his worshippers. The price was minuscule, the lightest of worship deeming one a follower.

It was so easy!

The cost of maintaining the position wasn't high either. If one didn't offer any sacrifices, then there would be no cost to bear. However, Richard knew well that those with ability would choose to offer something. And after the first time would come a second, and a third... The Eternal Dragon never pressured any of his worshippers, and almost never punished them. However, as long as one had desires, the path of offerings had no end.

Most importantly, the old dragon didn't reject any other gods. He was one of the few gods that did not mind his followers worshipping others as well.

Still, this did not mean the others felt the same. If Rolf activated the third level of the scroll, his faith in the Eternal Dragon would leave a brand on his soul. If he then started worshipping a god of Faelor, this new deity would definitely see the mark. Unless Rolf could find a way to remove it or the god was understanding, there would be no chance of the conversion happening.

Of course, the depth of the brand was directly related to the power of the god. Who could remove a brand the Eternal Dragon

had carved with his divine force? The gods could perhaps forgive a follower of an opponent, but they would never let someone who worshipped a foreign deity go.

Kellac had taken a week's worth of divine force to scribe the scroll, and Flowsand had processed it herself to ensure the item was worth it. It could be said that every one of these scrolls would create a solid ally.

The smile on Richard's face slowly grew milder. Chuck, Phinbar, Blackwing, and that unnamed archer... All of them started popping up in his mind. He sat quietly in front of the window, his gaze on the darkness of the night. His blessing of wisdom was operating to its fullest extent, giving him the ability to process information at thrice the speed of the normal person. Numerous battle plans flashed through his mind, almost all rejected for one reason or the other. Still, there were ten feasible plans by the time he wound up. He was confident that any one of them could leave either Chuck or Phinbar dead.

Only then did Richard realise the true extent of his power.

Early the next morning, Richard began to gather his troops into an elite force with 100 barbarians, 200 desert warriors, 200 of the mercenaries from the Demon Hunting Spears, and all of his throwers. He had taken them out by dusk, disappearing into the vast Bloodstained Lands.

He was dressed differently this time, no longer in his mage robes but in fencing garments that were easier to move around in. A simple cloak served to block the wind and sand, while two blades crossed on his back. One was the nameless elven sword, the other Sinclair's dagger.

Over the next few days, it was as if a tornado passed through Bluewater's surroundings. All the Red Cossack strongholds within a hundred kilometre range were completely levelled!

Richard commanded the troops with ease, winning all the battles



and annihilating over a thousand men while losing less than ten of his own. In smaller-scaled battles, he was a veritable god of war.

The reaper wandered throughout the Bloodstained Lands, its whereabouts unpredictable. A few days later, a second class Red Cossack caravan entered Richard's line of sight. This was no coincidence; someone had sold the information to him.

## Book 3, Chapter 16 - A Battle For Vengeance

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A 1000-gold reward would be given out once the caravan's route was confirmed. This was enough to attract most commoners and even some fighters. With the elite bats serving him, Richard had no problems communicating with Bluewater Oasis; those who wanted the reward could inform a liaison in Bluewater and he would know in at most half a day.

This second-class caravan didn't have too many supply carriages; in fact, there were less than, making it seem like it wouldn't make much profit. However, the 300 guards surrounding it exposed its true value. The size of the army and the Red Cossack flag would let them traverse the Bloodstained Lands at will.

On this day, however, a cavalryman jumped out from the dense fog in front of them, blocking their path ahead.

The corner of the leader's eye twitched, and he raised his arm for them to stop. All the guards were ordered to be alert, while he sent a few messenger hawks off immediately. This man had wandered the Bloodstained Lands for many years; if someone dared block their path despite the flag, they obviously came prepared.

Richard halted his warhorse, staring icily at the second class caravan opposite him. He didn't mind waiting for them to set up defensive formation.

Once the caravan finished preparing their defensive measures, he raised his arm and pointed at them calmly, "Kill them all."

Squad after squad of soldiers charged past him, running towards the caravan in the most orderly of formations. The first row was made of barbarian soldiers with heavy shields, and following were the throwers. After that came the elves and the archers from the Demon Hunting Spears. Last of all were the foot soldiers from the Demon Hunting Spears.

First came the battle of arrows. The enemy archers were easy enough to take down with their own, but it was once the throwers were in range that Richard's army revealed their true ranged might. A hundred sharp whistles rang out in the air, causing all the guards looking upon the rain of axes to blanch. The carriage walls definitely couldn't block these terrifying axes!

Even if Richard wasn't in control, his army was strong enough to completely annihilate this caravan. Not much time had passed, and Richard himself had never imagined that his strength would rise so quickly. In front of opponents he used to consider strong, he only had to order their execution and it would be done.

Richard no longer bothered with the situation at the caravan, instead slowly turning his horse. Even if those guards managed to block the first volley of axes, they definitely wouldn't be able to sustain the second and third. It would be lucky if even half of them were alive once the throwers were through. With the support of the elven warsong, any decent number of them would have inestimable might.

Richard was waiting for the others. The ones that had killed Medium Rare.

A dry, warm wind blew across the red soil, causing it to roll and fly. Richard saw nothing besides this, but he would not completely believe his eyes. As someone familiar with the underworld, he knew assassins at or above level 10 had many methods of fooling the eye.

Three enormous bats flitted through the sky up above, and with their hearing sensed vibrations no human could on the ground. Richard could see ten vague silhouettes approaching his location in his mind's eye, less than a hundred metres away.

His smile suddenly grew chilly!

"Flowsand!" a ray of divine light shimmered the moment Richard called out, landing on his body. Outburst was activated!

The blazing mana only strengthened Richard's desire for battle. A stern look overcame his face as he roared thunderously, "BLACKWING!"

Blackwing!

Blackwing!

Blackwing...

His voice echoed through the dunes, twelve fireballs forming an eye-catching line of fire in the sky as they fell in the same region. The high temperature distorted space, the faint silhouette of a human figure popping into existence. This silhouette looked like it had come out of nowhere in the empty desert.

In that instant, Blackwing's face was completely distorted from the shock. All he could see were the surging flames. Wave after wave quickly spread out, covering a hundred-metre radius. This left the assassin with no way to instantly escape unharmed, the flames drowning out his vision leaving him unable to find a line of safety.

Even if the area covered hadn't been so extensive, Blackwing still couldn't have escaped. He was still stealthed, limiting his speed greatly. By the time he even felt like something was off the first fireball had already exploded in front of him. He had blocked it with his own energy, but the impact forced him out of hiding. The momentum of the attack left him with no choice but to sustain the energy barrier and try to resist, leaving no chance for him to do anything else.

Looking at the stream of twelve fireballs heading his way, the assassin almost couldn't believe his eyes. Had his mind been a little clear, he might even have thought there were eleven other invisible great mages nearby, casting alongside Richard.

Thankfully he found an opening in the last moment, activating all his energy to form a grey antimagic shield. This was a powerful

ability attached to his leather armour, able to reduce the might of an offensive spell by two entire grades.

Even so, Blackwing was left in despair. This region with the twelve spells was like the abyss or hell. Even if he could hold on until the magic came to an end, he would still wind up gravely injured. This was the scary part about mages— their spells were so powerful that they could practically crush all others of the same level in direct combat.

Still, magic had an inherent time limit. As long as he could survive this, chances were high that he'd manage to escape.

The sound of the first explosion was drowned out by the whistling of the following spells, making it seem like it was completely quiet. Blackwing watched the tide of fire expanding soundlessly, drowning his body.

'It hurts! It hurts so much!' These were his first thoughts.

The agonising pain from these fireballs was much more intense than any he had faced in the past. He'd even braved a fireball head-on once, charging forward. But that wasn't even half as painful as this! The last time, he had managed to get through the fires and cut the mage into a dozen pieces. Now, all he wanted was to escape!

"I need to escape!" Blackwing nearly cried out. However, instincts formed over years of battle caused him to hug his head and protect his body, crouching down on the ground. He did his best to minimise the area torched by the scalding fire that seemingly locked him into a small area. All his senses seemed to stop working, just staying there leaving him dizzy. Only lying on the ground like this could he still feel connected to reality.

Wave after wave of fire whistled past him, leaving him with a pain he could not describe. Under the threat of death, his staunch resolve began to waver. He even started to suspect that in the scant three seconds in which Richard had launched the twelve fireballs, the mage had also boosted their power.

Indeed, magic penetration and spell boosts did have many similarities.

The waves of fire struck each other and multiplied in power, their combined force much greater than their sum. Although he hadn't been struck by all of them, by the time the last wave passed Blackwing swayed where he stood. He could somewhat see Richard's figure through his blurred vision, and looking at another familiar silhouette getting somewhat close he heaved a sigh of relief and collapsed.

Richard swayed a bit himself, the feeling of all his mana being drawn out in an instant as terrible as always. However, seeing Blackwing forced out of stealth and falling, the gloomy aura hanging over him started to dissipate.

"Kellac!" he called out, and a vitality spell fell from the sky. Added to the effects of his own rune, his mana regenerated rapidly. The brilliance of divine spells shone once more; Kellac used a grade 5 protection spell that would greatly enhance his defence.

Only after the spell took effect did Richard turn back, flashing a smile at the assassin that was already within five metres of him.

When the assassin saw the divine spell flash over Richard, he was stunned. Being someone of experience, he instantly recognised it for what it was and was left feeling unsure. Be it in terms of protection or regeneration, divine spells were far more effective than mana-based spells of the same grade. Now, he would find it difficult to kill the mage with a single stab.

But so what? Even though Richard had noticed him, he was already so close. How could he let such a good opportunity pass by? If one stab wasn't enough, then he would stab multiple times. Everyone knew how frail mages were, after all. The assassin cheered himself on, hissing as he left stealth to pounce on Richard like an eagle.

Before he could even recover from the shock, a tremendous

strength that was difficult to block suddenly came from Richard's long sword, knocking his dagger away. The follow-up came like lightning, cutting straight down at his body.

The assassin was absolutely shocked, brandishing his weapon at full strength to parry the strike. But he could not withstand the explosive power and fell backwards, frantically crawling out of range of the weapon.

Richard was in no hurry to pursue, his sword hand halting as he instead made a gesture. The glimmer of a divine spell shone once more; this time it was War Construct! A level 13 priest himself, Kellac was no weaker than Flowsand and her Book of Time when it came to supporting spells.

With Eruption and the two divine spells in tandem, Richard truly had turned into a war machine! A long hiss rang out, and he charged towards the pathetic-looking assassin with sword in hand. Tens of slashes were sent forth in the next moment, every strike lightning-quick yet filled with a blazing weight. A crescent flashed over his head from time to time.

In that moment, Richard scared the level 12 assassin witless!

## Book 3, Chapter 17 - A Battle For Vengeance(2)

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The assassin could never have imagined that a mage would one day hunt him down at sword's point. However, he didn't find the irony in the situation humorous, focusing on a desperate escape.

If not for his speed and agility, he would have been sliced in two. The sword in Richard's hands was far too sharp, breaking his dagger in two with only a few strikes. Even worse, sword lights flashed from the sword every now and then, sometimes narrowly missing his head and cutting off a few locks of hair. The assassin did not doubt that direct contact with this blade would leave him in pieces.

With only half his dagger left, the assassin had almost nothing useful on his person. Luckily he had a backup dagger, so he didn't have to parry the attacks empty-handed. With Richard's grasp of the dark arts, he could forget all about the idea of countering. If not for the awe-inspiring barrage of twelve fireballs earlier, he would have thought this person chasing him was actually a powerful assassin. No matter what techniques he used, he failed to widen the distance between them.

Richard used his sword skillfully as he chased the assassin. With the support of two powerful divine spells and Sinclair's dagger on him, he could defend against almost all of the assassin's tactics. The only thing the attacker could do was attempt to get as far away as possible.

At one point Richard suddenly slowed his pace, using what little mana he had recovered to cast an illumination spell. These kinds of grade 0 spells used almost no mana, only serving as a source of light. However, this light happened to fall on the hidden group of assassins that was nearing him!

The group of assassins suddenly realised that a halo of magic



light had appeared above their heads. The idea of an ambush now was nothing more than a joke.

The moment he threw all the assassins out of stealth, Richard stopped in his tracks. He allowed them to increase the distance rapidly.

The one who had just fought him was close to tears, extremely agitated from the close shave with death. He only dared to turn back for a momentary peek, seeing Richard standing still with a meaningful smile.

The assassin turned around once more, suddenly beginning to scream as he understood something. He'd actually moved out of close quarters from a mage?

Of course, Richard wouldn't give him the opportunity for regret. A flame arrow shot forth from his hands, a grade 4 spell that had more power than a fireball and could also follow a target. After the flame arrow came an acid arrow, and then another flame arrow. Richard had already turned his back once he cast the third spell, not even bothering with the assassin's plight.

Of course, the rest of the assassins weren't faring any better. Their faces paled at the sight of the rows of barbarian warriors closing in on them. This troop of warriors with heavy shields was basically a massive, mobile barrier when they assembled together. They were also surrounded by mounted desert warriors, and when Gangdor and Tiramisu appeared with their signature weapons they lost all hope.

Assassins were extremely lethal in specific situations, but a fight against heavily armed soldiers was bound to end in tragedy. In the faces of the heavy axes, falchions, and hammers, most of them were killed instantly.

Richard slowly returned the dagger to its sheath, lifting his head to look into the distance. Kellac walked over at the same time, "All the enemies are destroyed."

“No, not yet.” Richard shook his head in disagreement.

“The battle with the caravan is still ongoing, but none of them will be able to escape.”

Richard shook his head again, “No, I’m not referring to the caravan. Another person escaped, but forget it; we won’t be able to catch up.”

“Who?” Kellac asked. He didn’t feel anything out of the ordinary, but if Richard was this alert then the mage had to have sensed something he hadn’t.

An archer walked out from behind a huge rock that was hundreds of metres away from the battlefield. He put the eye-catching bow that was larger than his body away; there had been no opportunity to use the arrow he had nocked. He quickly stopped deliberating over the idea and whistled loudly, summoning a tall, black horse that had been resting under a nearby rock formation.

When he mounted his horse, the archer looked in the direction of Richard once more. His powerful vision allowed him to notice even the slightest of changes in the mage’s expression from such a great distance. Richard was stood firmly, pointing at him before pulling a thumb across his throat.

The archer shivered in fear, directing his horse in another direction and leaving quickly. He knew that a sniper like him was a nemesis of all mages. His enchanted tracking arrows travelled further than most spells, and had the force to pierce defences despite the distance. Thus, he was the one Richard would want to kill the most.

The sniper looked up, seeing a few bats circling in the skies. Their familiar black shadows cut across the horizon, only growing his fear. These creatures were definitely related to the great mage, and might even have been the ones that had discovered Blackwing and his subordinates. However, the fellow had never heard of bats

that could fly such long distances in the sweltering heat before, forget such mythical beasts.

Although he had killed more than a dozen mages, Richard's barrage of fireballs and his swordsmanship were truly unbelievable. The mage's skills changed his entire understanding of magic, hanging over his very existence like an unforgettable trauma.

Richard didn't bother about the archer any longer, walking towards Blackwing who lay unconscious on the ground with green fumes coming out of his body. He didn't even bother looking at the assassin's face, preparing to stab down with Sinclair's long dagger. He clearly intended for the death to be thorough; the blade had the extinction enchantment.

As one could infer from its name, the extinction enchantment contained powerful destructive energy. It was the nemesis of all life, making even the tiniest of injuries difficult to heal. Spells below grade 5 were directly rendered useless, while those above were greatly weakened. It would be great if they could perform to a third of normal potential. Regardless of whether Blackwing was still alive or dead, one stab with this dagger and death was guaranteed.

Just as Richard was about to stab down, Blackwing suddenly sprung up and stabbed forth with his dull blade. However, Richard's reaction was much faster than he had imagined. His longer blade pushed the other dagger away, still managing to pierce the assassin's chest. Blackwing's expression grew malicious as he ignored the injury, firmly pushing the weapon in further as he tried to take Richard down with him.

However, the blade suddenly changed directions and forced Blackwing to lose his grip. All of the assassin's strength was used to stab through Richard's robe, only barely managing to reach the flesh. Richard's skin felt as tough as dragon scales!

At that moment, Richard's blade had already pierced through Blackwing's heart. He expressionlessly shifted to a two-handed grip, squeezing softly to tear it apart.

Blackwing's eyes went lifeless. He realised his dagger couldn't go a single centimetre farther, and it was all he could do to stare at Richard and pant heavily. Only then did he remember the magical light that illuminated Richard's body, everything suddenly making sense.

Richard was still blessed by two immensely powerful spells. The idea of trading lives was just wishful thinking. Blackwing fell to the ground once more, and this time he would never stand again.

The sight of Blackwing's shock and grief just before his death left Richard feeling an inexplicable happiness and satisfaction. He'd known from the start that Blackwing was only pretending to be dead; the assassin had planned to make a final try once he grew closer, and he was all too glad to oblige. He had moved to Blackwing's side for the sole purpose of giving him that extra chance, to give the man some hope that he could complete his final mission in life.

The divine spells still in effect, Richard's body had been no different from that of a magic puppet. Still, even though Blackwing knew this, he had no choice but to give it a shot. Had he continued to feign death, Richard would have sent him on with a final stab.

Richard suddenly realised that it was only this kind of cruel, gory murder that could vent his emotions. He now understood why some characters were always shouting about how satisfying a kill was on the battlefield.

The battle with the caravan was nearing its end. The waves of flying axes had left the defence a mess, and what followed had been a massacre. The mercenary archers and foot soldiers showed their great skill for the first time in battle, not letting a single soul

escape.

The aftermath would naturally be handled by his subordinates, and Richard had no interest in what exactly populated the carriages. No matter what, the goods of a second class caravan would be worth somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 gold.

Richard dug out Blackwing's shattered heart, summoning Tiramisu. The ogre bathed his brother's skull in the blood.

Rays of light shot out of the skull, absorbing the fresh blood to create a pattern on the bone. Red fumes emerged from the nasal cavity, carrying a faint sound of the dead ogre's roars.

The red fumes floated around in the air a few times before they were all sucked in by Tiramisu. The ogre blanked out, as if he didn't understand what happened. Only after what seemed like half a day did he fall to the ground and hug the skull, wailing out loud.

Medium Rare's soul was freed from the skull, but this also meant that the ogre had truly left the world. He would have to co-exist with his brother in another form.

Richard just sighed as he patted Tiramisu on the back, no words of comfort to be found.

## Book 3, Chapter 18 - Harvest

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The battlefield was cleaned up swiftly, the spoils of war listed down.

The second-class caravan was transporting cloudiron ore. While this material was slightly worse than lafite steel, it was still a great choice for making weapons and armour. Weapons made from it, in particular, could be enchanted to a great extent. As far as the cost efficiency went, this was the best material for magic equipment.

These carriages of ore didn't seem like much, but back in the human kingdoms they could be sold off for 150,000 coins. Now, they naturally fell into Richard's hands. Outside of that, the horses, weapons, and armour that they collected amounted to several tens of thousands more.

Blackwing's armour also caught Richard's attention. It was made from the hide of a sunset dragon, giving it powerful defence and darkness resistance. There were three enchantments added on, including defence, stealth, and a powerful resistance to magic. The magic resistance was comparable to two enchantments on its own; even in Norland, few mages could imbue a set of armour with this attribute. The total number of effects put this armour's quality near the legendary realm. Of course, Sinclair's daggers had possessed an entire six effects, including the extinction and destruction effects. They were true legendary weapons.

Richard flipped over the armour in his hands and appraised it, gaining an approximate understanding of its value. The hide was naturally sturdy, and the processing had clearly been outstanding. Even the twelve fireballs had not been able to harm it.

Looking at this armour, Richard couldn't help but consider himself lucky. Without the magic penetration rune, even with Outburst his fireballs might not have been able to put the assassin down so easily. With this thought in mind, Richard called Olar

over and handed the armour to him, “I’ll give this to you. Once we get back, make yourself familiar with it.”

The elven bard was a decent appraiser in his own right. He could tell the armour was unordinary the moment it entered his hands, and he was only more startled after he took a closer look, “No, Master! Absolutely not! This armour is too precious, I cannot take it. I am of low status, and it isn’t worth it to waste such precious equipment on me.”

Richard pushed the set into Olar’s hands, saying in a commanding tone, “Take. It.”

“This... I understand, Master.” Olar’s hands were trembling slightly as he took the gift. Something with such great defence and magic resistance basically gave him another life on the battlefield.

“There’s no need to worry. You might have signed a slave contract with me, but I see you people as my followers, not my slaves.”

Olar was extremely surprised, unable to help but take another look at Richard. Follower was not a word that could be used flippantly. It had a specific meaning when uttered by a lord in Norland, granting one a set of complete privileges and strict obligations. Richard’s words made him to the mage what the thirteen were to Gaton...

The slaves had all been imprisoned by then. Out of the hundred or so captives, most of them were merchants or other personnel; less than twenty of the guards had survived. Six of the assassins under Blackwing had also been taken alive. These killers were surrounded by heavy infantry, with an outer circle from the Demon Hunting Spears. Knowing that they had no chance of escaping alive, those with frail wills had chosen to surrender. Perhaps it was because they had taken too many lives themselves, but they weren’t as willing as the guards to battle to the death.

Gangdor pointed at the killers and asked, “Boss, what do we do

with these people?”

Richard slowly walked past the six assassins, his icy gaze brushing across each one. Terror, apprehension, nervousness... he saw it all in their eyes. Outside of that he also saw something else, a gigantic figure— that of Medium Rare.

“They are still useful...” he began.

The assassins immediately heaved a sigh of relief, all thanking Richard for his benevolence as they vowed to work for him and remain loyal forever.

Richard looked at them and said indifferently, “You do have your uses, but not in what you expected. Zendrall!”

The necromancer answered the call and moved up, looking at the assassins with turbid eyes as he said gloomily, “They can work, but they’re not that good.”

The assassins were likely more familiar with mages than they were with warriors. “Necromancer!” one of them suddenly shrieked.

All of them were left aghast, beginning to struggle in an attempt to flee at all costs. Some even tried to die with the guards watching over them.

The necromancer inspired a deep terror in their hearts. Given their knowledge of how to deal with mages, they understood that their power would not be reduced if they were turned into undead while still alive. In fact, there were high chances of their might even increasing. However, this was an excruciating process that scarred the very soul with indescribable pain. Death was a sweet ending compared to this sort of torture, even if their souls were fated to have no release in that either.

However, Gangdor pounced over and beat them up, knocking all of them down. A team of barbarians carried them and followed Zendrall. Late in the night, they would all become little pets of the



necromancer.

“How about the others, boss?” Gangdor asked again.

Richard looked at the rest of the prisoners. He initially wanted to execute them all, but some slight hesitation eventually changed his mind, “Turn the willing into slaves. Those who refuse are to be executed.”

A dozen people who could not be tamed were pulled out of line and beheaded by the falchions of the desert warriors. All of them cursed loudly at Richard before their deaths, swearing that Red Cossack would definitely seek vengeance on their behalf.

A dozen blades fell, and a dozen heads rolled.

Flowsand sighed at the sight, “It must be these kinds of people that brought Red Cossack to their current status.”

Kellac sighed as well, the wrinkles on his face growing more prominent, “Every organisation that can survive in the Bloodstained Lands needs to have spirit. A spirit that comes from people like them.”

Compared to the ruefulness of the two officials of the Eternal Dragon, Richard was much colder. He had to do his best to suppress the hatred within him, avoiding calling Zendrall back. When he was by Medium Rare’s body, he had wanted to throw every member of Red Cossack, from the leaders to the slaves, to the necromancer regardless of whether they were alive or dead. He could refine their souls into energy for his spells.

“That spirit can be destroyed as long as enough of them are killed,” Richard stated calmly.

Kellac said nothing, merely shaking his head. As one of the leaders of the Demon Hunting Spears, he still knew a fair number of people in Red Cossack. However, now that he was a priest of the Eternal Dragon, his faith had taken over his entire existence. Leaving his body in his god’s hand had become a deep-rooted

habit.

## Book 3, Chapter 19 - Untitled

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Two days later, Richard and his troops returned to Bluewater. Having received news of his arrival, Amon and Devon were waiting outside for him. They knew that he had just plundered a second-class Red Cossack caravan, which meant they could each reap a reward of about thirty to forty thousand in profit. This was a highly profitable business.

However, even they were surprised by the two saints in attendance. Falcao, who had just arrived the previous day, had joined Rolf to tag along with the welcoming party.

Ever since he was gifted the War Construct scroll, Rolf had felt uneasy about Richard's safety and wanted to see him. As for Falcao, the news of Rolf's rune had piqued his interest, causing him to swallow his arrogance and deliberately seek a good relationship with Richard. As a spellsword, he naturally had a deeper understanding of magic than Rolf. He knew the effects of a rune had to be like any other magic item. If the maker was lax or materials inferior, it would be dramatically worse. If he wanted something ideal, pleasing this great mage was of utmost importance.

Richard's warhorse was trotting towards the welcoming party. Looking at the lineup from a distance, he felt a little startled. There were two extraordinary auras in the crowd, and although both tried to suppress it to the best of their ability, even dressing down and hiding in the crowd, there was no way for them to escape his perception. Every runemaster was exceptionally sensitive, an important characteristic in the craft.

With one of these auras coming from Rolf, Richard felt a sense of pleasant surprise. The swordsman had evidently studied the manual for the scroll, feeling confused by the minimal display needed to unlock the greatest level of power. It would only be a matter of time before Rolf fell into the domain of the Eternal

Dragon, and all he needed to do now was find an appropriate time to kick the fellow into a lake of fire to destroy the last dregs of his resistance.

The other person of similar imposition was a scholarly-looking middle-aged man. Even though Richard had never met him, Richard inferred that this was Falcao, one of two saints that were a part of the Golden Warflag. He must have reached the place a few days ago, or the Red Cossack saints would have arrived as well. Devon would not make such a mistake.

Richard adjusted his emotions and flashed his most radiant smile, spurring his horse onward. “Devon, Mr. Amon!” he cried from afar, “Why are you people here? Are you in urgent need of some profit?”

Both put on sincere smiles, welcoming Richard. The three exchanged pleasantries as though they were long-time friends that had never seen one another in forever. The two old foxes were sly and difficult to read, but Richard himself was no better.

Once done, Richard ‘unintentionally’ shifted his gaze to Rolf. “Lord Rolf!” he cried out with surprise on his face, “Why are you here?”

Rolf got off his horse, walking towards Richard with a smile, “I would never have guessed that a great mage with a bright future like you would also be an outstanding general. I heard you just destroyed a second-class caravan, but your troops seem to have sustained little damage. I’m sure no more than three others in the Sequoia Kingdom could perform such a feat.”

Richard laughed and shook his head, “I don’t know much about strategy, I’m just lucky. Besides, there were many accidents when I was fighting the caravan, luckily I managed to take care of them. Now, I’m quite sure you all know this man...”

Richard took out a human head from his bag as he spoke, passing it to Rolf. The saint swordsman took the head, looking at the face

before he could make a guess. “Blackwing!” he suddenly cried it out in alarm.

“What?” The faces of Amon, Devon, and even Falcao changed. They immediately gathered around, their gazes landing on the head in Rolf’s hands.

It really was Blackwing!

Everyone fell silent for a brief moment, their breath held in speechlessness.

Blackwing’s reputation was not one whit inferior to Chuck or Phinbar. Having been at level 15 for many years, he could have broken through at any time. A gifted assassin, more than half of the people on Red Cossack’s blacklist had fallen to his dagger.

It was less than ten days ago that Blackwing had killed one of Richard’s most capable subordinates right before Rolf’s eyes. Nobody would have expected Richard’s troops to return with his head so soon! Blackwing was a fearsome character, and somewhat rarely for assassins he seldom moved about alone. The more than ten experienced killers under him were enough to showcase his might.

Even Rolf and Falcao would rather mess with Chuck or Phinbar over picking a fight with Blackwing. If they fell on the assassin’s hit list, even saints like them couldn’t guarantee their own lives. After all, they couldn’t protect themselves with spells or abilities all the time.

Rolf inhaled deeply, uneasily managing to pull his attention away from Blackwing’s head. The moment of death was still captured on the assassin’s face, a mix of shock, anger, and utter disbelief. What circumstances could have left an assassin with so many heads to his name with such an incomprehensible expression?

When he looked at Richard again, Rolf’s gaze was complicated. This handsome young mage hid so many secrets under his alluring

smile.

“Master Richard, I believe Blackwing had some more assassins under him...” Rolf continued to probe.

Richard flashed a dazzling smile, waving it off, “Those pieces of trash are all dead.”

The entire group couldn't help but let out a cold breath. Even with luck on their side, destroying Blackwing's most powerful subordinates would take a heavy toll. However, all of Richard's closest aides were still around, evidently unscathed. Even the ordinary soldiers were mostly still present, without any visible change to their numbers. The only possibility was Richard's army far surpassing Blackwing's troops.

However, common sense dictated that this was impossible. Falcao couldn't take it anymore, asking directly, “Pardon my boldness, Sir Richard, did you really kill Blackwing so easily?”

## Book 3, Chapter 20 - Power

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“Yes!” Richard looked obviously lost, unable to understand exactly what was wrong, “Aren’t assassins just dishes on a plate once their traces are discovered? You can just surround them with heavy infantry and have a cavalry troop block their escape. Once your arches shoot into the encirclement, won’t you kill as many as there are?”

Falcao paled with no idea of what he could say. Richard’s statement was correct in theory; an exposed assassin was indeed not as good as most others at the same level. However, the problem came with the discovery of these traces the mage was speaking of. Could someone just discover Blackwing if they wanted to? He himself did not have this ability, and Rolf’s curious expression was proof that the swordsman was in the same boat.

“You truly are someone who can create miracles, respected Master Richard!” Falcao said sincerely.

“The Lord is the source of every miracle,” Richard suddenly said with a solemn expression. This left everyone deep in thought. Gods were indeed sources of miracles, and one was hidden behind this great mage.

On their way back to the inn, Flowsand found an opportunity to speak to him in secret, “Your acting skills are getting better! If you want to join the Church, you’ll definitely become a priest!”

Richard smiled in response, “One always grows quickly when they walk the line between life and death.”

“You’re only 17!” Flowsand said discontentedly.

Richard only continued to smile. With the upgraded blessing of wisdom, his seventeen-year-old body held a mature mind.

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By the time he returned to his room, the maid had already

prepared a tub of hot water. As per his instructions, she had poured in some relaxing lavender essence.

Richard stepped into the bath, immersing his entire body in the hot water. The fatigue from many days of battle flowed out of his pores as he unwound, thinking back to all the fights of the past few days. He started to quickly sift through the information, analysing the amount of power he held in his hands.

Blackwing's death had given him sufficient confidence. As long as he worked out an appropriate strategy, it wouldn't be impossible to kill a saint with his current forces. Both the Lens of Time and Outburst were crucial in a battle against a single target, and when combined with his own rune they allowed him to bring out his greatest might.

Kellac was a very important character as well. At level 13, he could perform grade 7 spells. The power of such buffs was adequately displayed when Blackwing was killed.

Olar, Zendrall, Flowsand, and Kellac... All of them had the power to turn the situation in a war around completely. The 200 barbarians served as the core of the army, while the throwers were extremely effective on the offensive. Even the desert warriors, despite their low level, were essential for their quantity and ability to fight in any terrain. Although hundreds had joined from the Demon Hunting Spears, the desert people could still be replenished with money.

Last, and most important, was still himself. His blessings were playing more of a role as time passed, especially with Precision which gave him an astonishing degree of control over the battlefield.

Richard replayed the process of every battle in his mind, pondering over the areas in which he lacked and figuring out how to improve them. These days he was always reading one book or the other about famous generals or essays by experts of war. He



also simulated some battle situations on his own whenever he was free, although all of them were small in scale. He still hadn't reached the point where he could take command of an entire campaign.

Spending some time on politics would allow him to sow the seeds for war in advance. However, his current influence left him far from able to actually make room for them to sprout. He could only rely on opportunities like had come from the Highland Unicorn.

In addition, with the two great blessings of wisdom and truth, Richard was strengthening his own control of magic by the day. Not only did this grow the power of his runes, it directly influenced his use of magic. Take the grade 6 Nature's Beckon, for example. He could finely tune the effects of the spell, lining all the direbears in a row...

About ten minutes later, when the water had cooled off, Richard felt that his fatigue had eased up quite a bit. He had come up with all sorts of plans to fight Chuck and Phinbar over this period of time. With his ability to think ten times as fast as the ordinary human, the ten minutes of deduction was equivalent to an hour and a half's worth of pondering for most others.

Done with the bath, he walked out and wore new clothes, returning to his room to begin his daily meditation. Even a legendary mage could only improve their mana pool bit by bit through meditation.

Ever since he crossed level 10, Richard had aimed to add two units of mana to his pool every day. This would allow him to reach level 12 after a month, giving him a chance to learn more grade 6 spells and craft a majority grade 2 runes.

Sitting in position, he quickly entered a state of deep meditation. His consciousness gradually delved out of his body, looking over it once more. However, as his mana slowly spread out, he saw a surprising three astral rays appear in the surroundings at the same

time!

Richard was delighted, immediately catching them all and sending themselves into his body one after the other. They turned another small part of his mana pool blue, many more blue dots circulating throughout his own body. All of this was the power from the blue astral rays he caught using the Deepblue Fantasy.

Just this discovery alone made this session much more efficient than any before it. Still, just as all three were integrated into his mana, two more started to glow in his mind's eye.

Richard was pleasantly surprised; this session was turning out to be unprecedentedly effective. He captured both of the new rays as well, fusing them into his own mana. However, just as these rays passed near the tree in his sea of consciousness, they were both absorbed by the central trunk with the nature affinity. He immediately felt his elven bloodline begin to strengthen, albeit very slowly. It was so sluggish that even he found it difficult to notice, but looking at the lights disappear he could tell that its power was growing.

This event was extremely significant. It implied that he could technically choose to strengthen any of his bloodlines whenever he wanted to! Although this time had only been by chance, it was proof of possibility.

Bloodline abilities were mysterious yet powerful. There was no rule that dictated their awakening and growth; in fact, a vast majority of the lucky ones who did possess bloodline abilities did not know where they came from. They didn't know when a second would appear, nor what kind of ability it would be. The higher the status of the one with the bloodline, the more worried they would grow over this matter.

## Book 3, Chapter 21 - Power(2)

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The Archeron and silvermoon bloodlines were both very high class, leaving Richard with hundreds of abilities from which his next would awaken. It was something beyond control, but at least with the ability to influence the strengthening of his bloodline he could influence things. Sadly his Archeron bloodline was a single network spanning his entire body, unlike the distinctly partitioned elven bloodline.

The results of the night's meditation were exceptionally obvious. He'd been able to capture three or four astral rays every hour, giving him the conditions to test his hypothesis. Indeed, the direction of the astral rays could be influenced slightly, pushing them towards or away from his bloodlines. The bloodlines would capture the rays whenever they drew close enough, strengthening slightly. Although his success rate wasn't great, this was still much better than a complete lack of control. On top of all that this increased capture rate of astral rays would greatly speed up his mana growth.

At dawn, Richard was pleasantly surprised to find that his mana pool had grown by three units. Although this was a drop in the pool when compared to his over 800 points of mana, it meant he could become a grade 12 mage in a month. At that point, he would be a proper true runemaster.

He went looking for Amon and Devon after breakfast, selling all the cloudforged ore in exchange for 80 sets of half-body plate armour, refined tower shields, one-handed axes, and corresponding shield enchantment scrolls.

All added together, these items cost close to 100,000 gold, slightly exceeding what he would get normally. However, considering that Richard was in a crucial period where he was expanding his army, the two didn't care too much about a 20,000 difference.

Still, they were a little curious. These custom sets were sufficient to equip a normal knight with, and the slaves Devon sold wouldn't be able to use such good items well. Of course, they wouldn't openly inquire; such things as the source of one's soldiers were top secret. It only confirmed in their minds that Richard was backed by a powerful family.

Unfortunately, the Bloodstained Lands were in a period of chaos after Sinclair had blown through. And despite the dark world's territory being minuscule compared to the human kingdoms, their power was still unpredictable. The two did not have the strength to investigate further.

Of course, they didn't know that this equipment was created for the army of level 5 humanoid warriors of the broodmother. Those drones were individually equivalent to level 9 warriors, and with the addition of this superior equipment, they would each surpass the common knight. On top of that, they were much more powerful than the same number of knights in combat. After all, few living beings were unafraid of pain and death, being absolutely compliant to their commander's orders.

The equipment had been designed with more emphasis on power than value. Only after finding out how expensive these sets would become did Richard abandon the idea of an entire army of humanoids, at least for now.

The level of the broodmother's drones was still quite limited, so he had no choice but to use equipment to compensate for the lack of power.

It was already late at night when the transaction was completed. Richard had also agreed to join Falcao for dinner. Devon was the only other one present, and the spellsword made known his desire to buy a rune that would substantially improve his abilities for a short period of time. He didn't mind even if it was single use.

Richard had finally figured out the mindsets of saints like Falcao

who had no hope of advancing in a short period of time. They had taken runes to be consumable, similar to magic scrolls and the like. They just assumed a rune could save one's life at a critical time, turning the tides of a battle. Of course, everyone knew what was more important between gold and chances of survival.

Richard himself was quite fond of the idea. Ever since the first rune he had sold in Faelor, he had planned to turn the permanent runes into consumables that would wear out after use.

The transaction was very successful. Richard agreed to give the man a rune identical to Rolf's, also gifting him a War Construct scroll as well. In exchange, he was compensated with the materials to make three runes and an additional 200 magic crystals.

Summed up, the transaction was 50,000 gold's worth of materials for something that would save one's life or kill an enemy. Both parties were satisfied with the price.

The only hiccup came with the scroll. Both Falcao and Devon had truly wonderful expressions after learning about the usage of the scroll. Just like Rolf, they could tell that it was a great opportunity and a terrible trap. Still, Falcao accepted. Richard had even said innocently that it could be given away if the saint did not want to use it.

Unlike Rolf, or even Falcao who was standing right in front of him, Devon had flashed an undisguised bitter smile. Seeing his objective met, Richard smiled in return and parted ways.

The moment he left the room, the eyes of the Falcao and Devon bounced to the magic sealing box at the centre of the table. The lid was open, revealing an exquisite divine scroll as well as an explanation of the faith. The looming divine power was proof enough of its great value. Illuminated by a magic lamp, the circulating energy was full of deadly temptation that left their throats dry.

On his way back, Richard couldn't help but marvel at Flowsand's

genius. The War Construct scroll was an irresistible trap that few people had the willpower to avoid, even if they knew there was an abyss ahead. It was especially so when they were in life or death situations.

Of course, it also had its price. Kellac needed to sacrifice a week's worth of divine power, while even Flowsand wouldn't be able to attack for three days.

But how exactly did she design it? This was something not even a genius could describe. Richard still knew nothing about the working of divine power. If not for Flowsand, this trip to Faelor would definitely have ended in disaster...

Once he was back at camp, Richard went around the place once with a few of his followers. Soon after, he started meditating again. The efficiency was still high, but this time he finally found the reason. Every use of Outburst roused all of his mana. Every cast of the spell by Flowsand left a remnant of divine power in him that slowly grew permanent and fused within.

## Book 3, Chapter 22 - Power(3)

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Even clerics and mages found it impossible to perfectly control their strength. Some mana would always overflow when they cast spells. Flowsand's exquisite control made the waste negligible, but when something like Outburst was activated the overflow was far beyond normal. For whatever reason, Richard could absorb divine power despite being a mage. And the more divine power he absorbed, the greater his response to the astral rays.

It was nine the next morning when Richard ended his meditation. Olar, who had been waiting at the doorway for a long time, informed him that the Direwolf Duke had sent an army over early in the morning. This time, they brought offerings that were of utmost importance.

Richard was quite surprised, immediately rushing downstairs. Three carriages were already parked in the inn's courtyard, fully armed soldiers in familiar armour guarding by the side. Every single one was level 10 at minimum, with a murderous aura that evidenced their experience in battle.

An iron tower of a knight was standing in the courtyard, in conversation with Flowsand. Richard's eyes suddenly felt sore the moment his gaze landed on the fellow, tears nearly flowing. The knight's sheer power shocked Richard; the radiating energy alone had caused him to suffer a hidden loss.

The knight turned his head, levelling an electric gaze at Richard before curbing his lofty aura. Richard looked at the steel-whiskered man in his forties, identifying him as Lord Moonbear whom he had met before at Twilight Castle.

Since they had met before, Lord Moonbear forewent any pleasantries and spoke directly, "Sir Richard, I've escorted these offerings here on the orders of the Duke. Duke Bevry will be here in three days."

Richard was taken aback, asking, “The Duke is coming as well?”

Lord Moonbear nodded, “Yes. His Grace hopes you will be able to prepare the necessary ceremony by the time he arrives.”

Lord Moonbear didn’t mention the kind of ceremony, but of course Richard understood. Bevry wouldn’t reveal all the details even to a trusted aide; after all, they could not let the details of the ceremony slip. However, the altar was supposed to be built on Richard’s territory originally; it seemed like the Duke had changed his mind. Was something going on in the Sequoia Kingdom?

He was still paying attention to the situation back in the kingdom. Although the flow of intelligence wasn’t all that great, there were still some gains. He had been able to interpret some information from what originally seemed incoherent.

The Fontaines were one of the greatest producers of weapons in the Sequoia Kingdom. The Horn of Kane was another huge production site, and the largest copper and iron mine they relied on was said to be running out, but a branch of it was found in Richard’s current territory. Although the land nominally belonged to the Direwolf Duke, it had basically never been developed. Most interesting was the fact that Richard’s mine was connected to both the Fontaines’ and to the Horn of Kane.

The Horn of Kane was owned in combination by three Earls— the king’s nephew Layton, Zim’s father Yatu, and The Earl of Strength Pamela. Zim evidently wouldn’t be the only person Richard would have to go to war with.

The entire thing reeked of conspiracy. Still, Richard didn’t spend too much energy on guessing whether Bevry knew anything. As long as the facts proved that the idea of targeting the Bloodstained Lands was correct, everything was alright. The most important thing now was to use this time to strengthen his army.

“Sir Richard,” Lord Moonbear interrupted Richard’s thoughts, “Here’s a list of our goods.” The man then passed him a scroll,



instructing all the knights on guard to keep watch outside as he personally closed the door.

The scroll had a magic image upon it, the skeleton of a huge dragon. Although it was incomplete, one could still feel a terrifying aura coming from it. The image flickered a few times before the scroll ran out of mana, turning into a wisp of flame that faded away.

Richard walked over to the carriages and opened them up with Moonbear's help, exposing the skeletal remains within. A powerful aura surged out the moment the flaps were lifted, causing Richard to pale slightly. Although this dragon had been dead for a long time, its remains still held great power.

"True draconic remains! I take it the Duke won, then?"

Lord Moonbear sighed, "A pyrrhic victory. Only two of the four regiments we sent out returned. More than 4,000 soldiers were lost, amongst which were many elite veterans. After all, we were basically fighting the entire Whiterock Dukedom; the enemy had much greater numbers than we did. Earl Jayleon's castle is also well-known for its defensive capabilities, over a thousand of our brothers were left behind at its base.

"I still don't understand why we started such a great war. Just for these old bones? If I find out that someone dared to deceive the Duke, I'll be the first one to break his bones!"

Lord Moonbear's words had a questioning tone. A burning glare was levelled in Richard's direction, with a powerful vindictive aura radiating from his body. Richard understood that this saint already thought he was a treacherous minister who had bewitched the Duke.

Duke Bevry naturally wouldn't tell his subordinates the details of his pact with Richard. With the latter being a new frontier knight whose origins were unknown, it was normal for an experienced saint like Lord Moonbear to look down on him. The indignance

was only to be expected. Richard had no doubts that, if Moonbear acquired any concrete evidence against him, the man wouldn't even wait to report it to the Duke before killing him.

However, he would not concede this time. Lifting his head, he met Moonbear's electric glare. A confrontation of gazes sparked in the empty space between them, almost giving rise to a fire!

Richard suddenly smiled, "Lord Moonbear, have you heard of Blackwing?"

"Of course, that crazy mutt!"

"A crazy mutt I beheaded only a few days ago," Richard said calmly, "His head was publicly exposed outside the city. Did you not see it when you entered?"

Lord Moonbear's expression immediately turned serious. He certainly knew how difficult it was to kill Blackwing. More than one important character from the Sequoia Kingdom had died at the assassin's hands, but the man himself had lived on all this while. A level 15 assassin was sometimes more terrifying than a normal saint.

## Book 3, Chapter 23 - Dedication

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Seeing the change in Lord Moonbear's expression, Richard continued lightly, "I heard Blackwing was almost a saint. I'm not long from levelling up myself, becoming a level 12 great mage. Tell me, Lord Moonbear, do you think I could kill one or two saints after that?"

The man huffed heavily, his expression ugly, but he didn't say anything. It wasn't much to offend a level 12 mage, but to anger one that wasn't yet twenty was not smart.

Looking at his taciturn behaviour, Richard didn't bother with him anymore. He waved Flowsand over; whether these bones could serve as an offering still depended on her. Flowsand cautiously checked the skeletal remains, even using both hands to carefully caress the dragon's skull. Her expression was a little strange, but with her back to both Richard and Moonbear neither of them saw it.

Richard quelled the tension in his heart, asking in the calmest voice possible, "So?"

An hourglass appeared in the depths of each of the cleric's two amber eyes, faint light shining on the bones. A moment later, she nodded, "Can do."

Can do. Two simple words, but the meaning behind them was something only Richard and Flowsand knew. He took a deep breath, but that did not manage to bring his heartbeat back to normal before he turned to Lord Moonbear, "It's time. We should prepare to welcome His Grace."

Lord Moonbear nodded, "Do you need some people to stay on guard?"

"Sure, but my lab is right behind us. Nobody outside of you can be allowed to enter this courtyard."

Moonbear gave Richard a meaningful look before striding out of the courtyard, instructing fifty knights to guard various points around the inn. He also took another 300 men and stationed them under Richard's leadership at the camp.

The Bloodstained Lands were undoubtedly dangerous, but that was only to ordinary people. The borders were no different from a smooth road to Lord Moonbear, and it was almost impossible for someone here to actually be a threat to the Direwolf Duke.

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Once Richard and Flowsand returned to his room, he asked again, "When you said it's possible just now..." The topic was so important that his voice was trembling.

Flowsand looked at him strangely, asking in return, "What do you think?"

"We can return to Norland now?"

Flowsand cast her gaze downwards, asking in a casual tone, "Are you eager to go back?"

"Are you not?" Richard was stunned.

"Of course I am!" she played it down.

"Who isn't?" he asked with a dry laugh

"Alright, don't worry about it anymore. The skeleton should be enough for us to get Norland's coordinates." However, her head was lowered to stop him from seeing her expression.

"Really?!" This joy had come too quickly.

When Flowsand raised her head once more, she had a sunny smile. "Really!" she said with energy.

Richard pulled her into a hug, spinning her a few times before setting her down, "I'm so lucky to have you!"

"Oh? Then how are you going to thank me?" Flowsand fixed her

gaze on Richard, her eyes as bright as the stars in the sky.

“What do you want?” he puffed out his chest.

“First, I want to know what it is you saw that caused you to change so much,” Flowsand said seriously.

Richard was stunned. He did not understand why she would ask this question, and despite his great joy he hesitated for a long time. If possible, he did not want her to know about the two scenes he had witnessed. Instinct told him even the most generous girl would not tolerate something like that. But her gaze was too sharp, too bright. He couldn't even look straight on at her, eventually unable to do anything but nod his head in agreement.

This immediately made her very happy. She hooked his neck with her arms, lightly licking her lips as she continued with her unique hoarse voice, “Second. You're not allowed to separate from me until dawn!”

It would be a fierce war.

Richard gradually grew more solemn, clenching his teeth and nodding hard. Looking at him gnashing his teeth, Flowsand laughed heartily. Her showing off was unprecedented.

As night fell, an alluring but desperate battle began. If not for a silencing domain that Richard had set up, their screams would have reverberated throughout the inn.

Richard did not win the battle of will and endurance, giving way before dawn. Flowsand had been completely invested in herself for the first time and had no intention of letting Richard win. She tormented him to the point of extreme exhaustion, until even the sturdy physique he had cultivated in the Deepblue could not take it. He eventually ended up lying down, letting her wreak havoc from atop him.

It was only then that Richard learnt how good those of the Church of the Eternal Dragon were at close combat, and that

Flowsand was excellent even amongst them. All of his intent to turn the sides in the second half of the battle had been mercilessly suppressed.

And thus, Richard could not persist until dawn. He ended up not knowing what exactly had happened, unable to keep track of how many times he had orgasmed despite his many blessings. As for Flowsand, the moment she shed her warmth she had become a ferocious beast. After one specific peak, all he saw before his eyes was darkness. As the last bits of his consciousness faded away, only two things were left in his mind.

Pain, and happiness.

The intoxicating night left Richard in a deeper sleep than he had been in for a long time. Most of his recent nights had been spent in meditation, but this time he was so tired that the sleep was extremely refreshing. Somehow, he still managed to wake up the moment the clock hit six.

Richard was assaulted by a mind-numbing headache, every muscle in his body incredibly sore while his limbs were heavy as lead. He had to exert all his energy just to raise his hand a little, and with less than two hours of sleep he still wasn't very clear-headed. The craziness of the last night was right before his eyes, but at times it grew blurry. It was like the experience was part of a confusingly realistic dream.

He shook his head heavily, struggling up and looking around him. The room was a mess, a silent record of the various ridiculous and crazy actions of the previous night. However, Flowsand was not beside him.

It took a massage of his forehead to feel a little better. 'This Flowsand!' he thought a little helplessly, 'She definitely went to study the bones!' Sometimes, she was even more diligent than him. Still, he wasn't too worried. Having known her for so long, he had figured out long ago that her physical strength did not lose out

to his. It was like she wasn't a cleric at all, her unfathomably flexible and nimble body hiding great strength. Without Eruption activated, he himself wasn't much stronger than her.

## Book 3, Chapter 24 - Dedication(2)

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Flowsand's bodily strength was no weaker than Richard's, despite him being fed the special food of the Deepblue. That wasn't all; she also possessed exceptional close combat skills, could use any sort of weapon, and knew how to take advantage of all types of terrain. Richard had experienced this first hand.

Although he himself had learnt the techniques of the underworld from Naya, most were focused around defence. Flowsand, with her added magical capabilities, was actually superior to him in hand to hand combat.

It was just like when he himself had used Sinclair's long dagger, Eruption, two powerful divine spells, and the secret swords of Silvermoon to overwhelm the assassin who was of a similar level. If anyone thought defeating Flowsand would be easy if they closed the distance, they would find themselves in deep trouble.

Flowsand possessed the ability to fend off attacks from any angle, her body unimaginably lithe. The ability she showed on the bed was equally effective on the battlefield, if not even better. As long as she was willing, she could send any man to heaven before dropping them into a deep abyss of eternal despair.

It was only this past night that she had shown her true capabilities. It was the first time that he had been overwhelmed by intercourse, completely dominated near the end. It verified the old saying that magic was like the water in a sponge. The more one squeezed, the more water would come out. The last night had squeezed out all of his essence.

He also discovered something else. If Flowsand was unwilling, he could not force anything upon her. If he tried, she would be able to destroy him in an instant.

When Richard got out of bed, he did not care that the water in the basin was extremely cold. He washed his face before pulling a



window open, letting the comfortable cool breeze blow into the room. Flowsand was indeed in the courtyard, only just making her way back to her own room. All he could see was her back, but she seemed to be full of vigour.

When his gaze landed on the three carriages, satisfaction flooded his heart. These supply vehicles represented his hope of returning home. He wanted to go back and see his teacher, to grow stronger and visit Klandor to tell the pony-tailed Mountainsea not to do anything foolish.

Truth be told, he still had a couple of small doubts in his mind. Firstly, judging from his experience with sacrifices the skeletal remains were only worth an intermediate sacrifice at most. Could an intermediate ritual that wasn't even supported by a physical church actually give them the coordinates of Norland?

And the second doubt was with respect to Flowsand's request. She had asked him to explain what he'd seen that turned him so gloomy. He wanted to slowly describe the visions in detail, even thinking to draw them out by hand. However, even though he had promised to tell her she did not bring the matter up at all. Since that was so, he wouldn't mention it himself. Intuition told him it wasn't a good time to share those details with her...

Flowsand wasn't around at breakfast either, locked in her room in the midst of research. This was not uncommon either, so he didn't think much of it. Dressing up after breakfast, he went out to meet Rolf and Falcao for a discussion about two more runes.

The coordinates would not be enough for him to return to Norland. Building a stable passage between planes required a lot of magic, meaning he had to get a lot of magic crystals. Thinking back to the teleportation gate that Lina had created, he estimated that he would need a minimum of 300 crystals to construct a portal that could be used twice. This didn't even include the resources needed to transport the broodmother's creatures; he hadn't seen any records about such a thing in Norland and the broodmother didn't

have it in her own genetic memories either. It was still a mystery whether the drones would be treated as beings or weapons.

300 magic crystals alongside the materials required to build the portal. Even with the prices in the Bloodstained Lands, this was worth more than 300,000 gold. In Norland or a human kingdom here in Faelor, it would be worth anywhere between 800,000 and 1,200,000! He was thus in dire need of money, now able to see that planar wars were in no way golden geese. One needed to throw in an enormous initial deposit, and even so, there were unforeseeable risks and the threat of enemies coming from all directions.

The only good news was that such a passage would bring the two planes closer to each other. Further portals would require less materials to create, and would also allow for more people and items to pass through. A hundred years of planning and investment would even allow him to send through an army more than a hundred thousand strong.

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Flowsand had buried herself in countless stacks of papers, all scribbled with numerous words, figures, and formulae as well as several cryptic texts. She would often bite the pen in her mouth, tugging hard at her short amber hair before burying herself once more in the data. If Richard could look upon this scene, he would definitely be shocked.

Already quite familiar with planar geometry, she was currently calculating the coordinates back to Norland. This was a field in which even Richard could not compare to her.

After writing down a huge chunk of calculations, she suddenly crushed all the paper in front of her into a ball and threw it against the wall. She then grabbed her hair once more, beginning to cry.

An entire afternoon of hard work had yielded no results, at least not the results she wanted. Without any divine grace, her own ability was not enough to calculate a route back to Norland. She

had originally wished to rely on a small amount of divine grace as a foundation to calculate their bearings; after all, she didn't need any precise coordinates on Norland. However, the entire afternoon of work proved it to be an impossible task.

This was not her first time attempting this calculation, and the result was no different either.

The girl was dazed, hot tears flowing uncontrollably down her cheeks to her neck, eventually soaking her robe. It was only after a long time that she rubbed her eyes hard, wiping the tears away before walking to a mirror to see her own reflection. She then cleaned her face up and left the room, the swollen red eyes the only vestige of her frustration.

Once again, she stepped into the courtyard where the bones were kept. Richard had ensured that she was the only one other than himself who could enter; even Moonbear's knights could only patrol outside the walls. She had heard when he opened the windows and when he left from the back door, but she hadn't wanted to be disturbed from her world of calculations.

Hourglasses appeared in her eyes once more, a light gold light landing on the bones. The Book of Time in her hands started glowing, becoming one with her field of vision. The bones seemed to have turned transparent in her sight, endless data converging into fine sacred texts that returned to her eyes.

This was one of two abilities her title granter her, Divine Appraisal. It allowed her to examine and analyse offerings, roughly gauging the amount of divine grace that the Eternal Dragon would grant. The higher the level of the executor of the ceremony, the more accurate the gauge was. With the Book of Time, Flowsand's variance was about half of a Dewdrop of Life.

A menu Then appeared in her mind, a number of options flashing through like lightning. It was so fast she couldn't adequately understand it, so she didn't bother spending any energy

trying. 'I need the coordinates of Norland, to ignite the Lighthouse of Time,' she quietly chanted in her heart.

The menu suddenly turned fuzzy before clearing up again, only one option left remaining. It was a strange talisman; if closely examined one would notice it was made up of countless sacred texts that filled it with a ton of information. It held records of Norland's coordinates.

However, Flowsand could not obtain these valuable coordinates yet. She could only do so with the divine grace granted after an offering. This skill was the second ability of the Daybreak Title, Whisper of Time. It allowed the user to select a required blessing from countless others, also finding out what they needed to sacrifice to obtain it.

When used together, Divine Appraisal and Whisper of Time were undoubtedly great for sacrificial ceremonies. The randomness of the gifts was a hallmark of the Eternal Dragon, and it wasn't uncommon for someone to perform three to five sacrifices to obtain what they desired. Luck was a good measure of strength when it came to such random ceremonies, but the constant chance of obtaining something meant one would eventually acquire it.

On the other hand, these two skills combined gave the executor of the ceremony a much better chance to get the sacrificer what they wished for. Simply put, it was a given.

Of course, such blatant cheating naturally came with great limitations. A selected few people could acquire the title, with less than ten in possession of it all over Norland. In addition, the title was strengthened every time it was used. For Flowsand this meant her connection to the Eternal Dragon only grew stronger, and the old thing never gave things away for free. The repayment, in this case, was to host more sacrifices.

Once she used her abilities to find how much it cost to get Norland's coordinates, Flowsand's complexion grew increasingly

bleak. If she wanted to use these dragon bones to obtain the coordinates of Norland, then they would need at least three more sets!

## Book 3, Chapter 25 - Dedication(3)

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The Direwolf Duke was badly injured in the war against the Whiterock Dukedom. It would be near impossible for him to obtain even one more draconic skeleton, forget three.

Given Richard's current rate of progress and some luck, he would become a duke within a decade. That would naturally give him the wherewithal to obtain enough offerings. However, he was impatient.

Flowsand sighed slightly, two scenes playing out before her eyes. Legendary mage Sharon, floating about in an endless void. Barbarian girl Mountainsea, charging towards an entire army with gusto. Richard had originally seen these visions during their last sacrificial ceremony through the power of time. When he agreed to tell her, he didn't have to speak a word himself; she had been able to witness them herself through a resonance of the power of time.

Flowsand was unusually bitter about the images that had unveiled themselves. She'd originally thought of moving on after a single look, but she had seen more than she wanted to.

The broken visions in his head were far clearer to her. There was a third vision, one of a raging war set against a beautiful, starry sky. Enemies of various shapes and sizes were flowing out of the void, and despite Richard's best attempts to resist with his army, there were just too many. His men fell one after the other, leaving him alone. He met his own ultimate end, ganged up on by a dozen enemies who were stronger than him. His eyes were filled with regret and wrath.

If only... If only he had more power; the situation could be avoided completely.

Flowsand had also seen a vision of herself. Miles and miles away, she was in the midst of a grand coronation. A simple crown was rested on her forehead, giving her the power of a pope. She would

soon have the authority to order the Church into secular wars. However, the war that had started from the revelation of a truename had already come to an end.

‘If I become stronger... Will I be able to change the future?’ she asked herself.

A young girl sighed lightly, wiping all images from her mind and walking back to her room. She had already expected this outcome, but she had refused to be convinced just yet.

Their gruelling experiences on this unknown plane would end the moment they returned to Norland. Richard was the most promising youth in the Archeron Family, destined to foray into countless planes. She would remain one of the best priestesses of the Eternal Dragon. Their paths were destined to diverge.

Flowsand returned to her room, closing the door carefully and setting up a divine barrier that could also block auras. If Richard came looking, he would know that she was doing something important and thus wait for her to finish before he returned.

There would be no problems if someone witnessed her upcoming ritual. However, she did not want Richard to look on; if he got to know, it would most certainly be interrupted.

She placed the Book of Time on a modest altar, opening it to a specific page and starting a chant. The book oozed a divine lustre the next moment, mysterious runes surfacing on the blank pages. A simple, desolate platform of light was built in the air, allowing one to place offerings down.

Flowsand hesitated for a moment, but she eventually stretched her hand and rested it on the altar. Her voice was soft yet resolute, “I, Daybreak Flowsand, hereby pledge my life to the noble Dragon of Eternity and Light. The Church of the Eternal Dragon shall forever be my home!”

An intense glow burst forth from the book the moment she

finished the sentence, shining upon her. She grew translucent under the illumination of the divine light, the mark between her eyebrows suddenly throbbing with excruciating pain as it started to change. The power of time flooded into it, every line expanding as the rune grew more and more intricate. Golden threads of time crawled around Flowsand's head, eventually wrapping around it completely.

This was the power of a vow made to a god. If Flowsand ever broke her oath, the divine power within would completely destroy her.

The powers of Flowsand's title were enhanced with the influx of power. The accuracy of her appraisal was increased, while the cost of the Whisper of Time was dramatically reduced. The Lens of Time was empowered as well, now more effective against beings that were higher in level. She could now cast the spell on beings six levels higher while the duration was increased as well.

The strengthening of her title was one of the blessings she received in exchange for her life. An enormous amount of divine grace started to flood in from all directions, coagulating into a huge ball of time energy. All sorts of silhouettes flashed within, various blessings and gifts present in abundance.

This was a blessing for the devout, but the cost was huge. So huge, in fact, that it was unbearable.

On the surface, it seemed common for those of the clergy to pledge their life to their god. Flowsand's relationship with Richard wouldn't change much either; they could still do whatever they wanted. She could even continue to fight by his side in the myriad planes as long as there was no conflict with the Church. The only thing that changed was the destiny of her soul, of her very existence; she changed from someone next to Richard to a servant of the Eternal Dragon.

She felt a sudden pang in her heart as she watched the energy



coagulating before her. It was so painful she couldn't breathe, every strand of energy cutting deep wounds in her heart.

She did not know why things were this way, when things had changed. Their first encounter was in her carriage on the way to pick up some slaves. Her first thoughts of this young apprentice runemaster were that he was handsome and bright, but right after came his impoverished state; a characteristic of the Archerons. Someone preparing for planar war only had one soul contract and a pathetic amount of enslavement scrolls. He barely had two dozen soldiers, while all of her expenses were paid for by the Church.

Quietly, she had a change of heart.

Alas.

Flowsand sighed quietly, reaching out for the ball of divine grace. The ritual was complete, unalterable. Dedicating oneself to the Eternal Dragon was a modest and straightforward affair, lacking much flamboyance.

## Book 3, Chapter 26 - A Change Of Fates

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When her long fingers touched the orb of light, the coordinates of Norland appeared within and entered her mind. There was still plenty of divine grace left afterwards, at least enough to obtain part of the reincarnation set or a guardian.

Looking through her options, Flowsand knew that she had to increase her level. She could go a complete two levels up with the remaining divine grace, allowing her Lens of Time to pose a threat to level 18 saints from Norland. That was the most dominant type of force in Faelor, with pitifully few people at that level. Of course, that was why such powerhouses were reputed guardians of entire countries.

However, she was feeling very lonely; rationality was not her desire. No, she wanted to leave a mark on this turning point in her life.

“Grant me the blessing of luck!” Flowsand said gently, reminiscing about her past with Richard.

The blessing of luck was a special kind of gift; it would form a piece of equipment, but the piece was decided based upon the sacrificer, and was extremely random. Even on the same day, a ceremony at dusk and dawn would grant completely different equipment. The only constant was that any item bestowed would prove to be very useful, in the present or in the future.

She quickly had the blessing of luck targeted at Richard. The remaining power of time converged, soon transforming into a dark gold pen that landed in her hands. Looking at this magic pen that was at the level of a divine artefact, her heart twitched a little. This was definitely a gift that suited Richard, the best kind of souvenir.

With all the divine grace used up, the Book of Time slowly closed. The dragon bones nearby had already dimmed, but they could still activate one last lesser sacrifice.

Flowsand stowed the Book of Time away, walking out of the room only to realise it was already time for dinner. This time, she requested to be alone with Richard.

“You want to tell me something?” Richard flashed a cheeky smile her way. He still had vivid memories of the wonders of the previous night, and as he thought back to it he was filled with both anticipation and fear.

“I have a present for you.” Flowsand handed him a rather exquisite looking box.

“Present?” Richard asked in a suspicious tone, eagerly opening it up. But then, his breath was immediately caught in his chest.

A divine tool! This was definitely a divine tool!

Richard quickly noticed that the pen was resistant to abrasion; it would never be worn down, and would last an eternity so he could do as he pleased. These were unbelievable attributes, but on top of that the entire design including the core was perfect without a blemish. It was a valuable item any runemaster would wish for, able to bring his runes to the next level. The success rate and scope of his runecrafting would immediately be increased.

He abruptly looked back towards Flowsand, asking in a slightly trembling voice, “Where did you get this?”

Flowsand raised her eyebrows and smiled, “There was some grace left over, so when I saw this pen in the options I decided to get it for you. It took almost nothing; why, is it not good enough?”

“NO! The complete opposite, it’s divine!” Richard said solemnly. He felt a little strange; Flowsand was normally very good at evaluating items... Did the Eternal Dragon look down on runemasters so much that something this powerful was cheap?

Flowsand shrugged, “Divine? That’s a relief. At least it didn’t go to waste.” She deliberately changed the subject afterwards, starting discussion about a rune set of her own.

The moment she mentioned it, Richard immediately started talking non-stop. Mystic Glory... He had already designed the core of the set, with three out of the six runes thought out. The runes weren't random either; the complete set would be even stronger than Waterflower's Breath of Darkness. Despite being made of a combination of grade 1 and grade 2 runes, it would not lose to a complete grade 2 set.

Flowsand thought it over, "Richard, Mystic Glory is just too complex. I think we can forget it for the time being, just focus on making a grade 1 set that doesn't need to be of the same standard as this or Breath of Darkness. Differences don't matter, it just has to be a set."

"Who for?"

This was an important question; the user of a rune set would form the basis for its design. However, Flowsand brushed it off, "It doesn't have to be for a specific person, it just needs to be a set. Think of it like designing a set for a basic rune knight."

A basic rune knight? This was quite extravagant thinking, an unrealistic goal so early into their journey. Richard muttered to himself for a while before asking, "Why do you want me to design something like that?"

"Once we return to Norland, you need to hold a rune convention. Every famous runemaster does it, and I feel like these conventions greatly increase the market for runes."

Richard quickly captured the hidden meaning, "After we... return to Norland?"

Flowsand blinked her eyes forcefully, "Yes! We can go back very soon. I promised you that we would have a way back."

"Do you have the coordinates?"

Flowsand tried to play it cool, "We will once we make an offering with the bones."

“What about Perrin’s problem? Bevry is extremely perceptive, he might figure something out,” Richard frowned.

“Don’t worry about that, the bones will give us enough grace. We can just extract a couple Dewdrops of Life and give them to him. The effect will be very obvious, the person who receives the gift will know. Besides, healing Perrin completely might just make Bevry hostile towards us.”

Richard felt like Flowsand’s words made sense, so he nodded his head.

.....

The next day, Duke Bevry reached Bluewater.

He smiled the moment he entered the inn, walking towards Richard and enveloping him with a warm embrace before saying, “Those fellows from Whiterock were very hard to deal with. Thankfully I managed to fight them off. I still feel scared when I think back to it, haha! Right, what about the skeleton?”

“It was very useful!” Richard said confidently.

“Good! That’s great!” The Direwolf obviously understood the underlying meaning, so he rubbed his hands together in excitement. Asking the guard next to him to close the door, he then spoke up, “Perrin, there’s hope for your illness now! Thank Sir Richard at once!”

It was only then that Richard realised the guard was Perrin in disguise. He had carefully covered himself up, changing his appearance and even shape until Richard almost couldn’t recognise him.

Having been plagued by his disease for such a long time, Perrin was naturally excited at the prospects of treatment. He wished for a prolonged life so he could continue his research.

Richard swung his hands, saying sternly, “Your Grace... Strictly speaking, the bones can only alleviate the symptoms and not

completely heal Perrin. You should think it through; Perrin's illness was a divine punishment. If you want to dispel it completely... the price you need to pay would be extreme."

"Alleviating the symptoms is good enough!" the Duke said immediately. He had been unable to help with Perrin's problem all these years, leaving his son on the brink of death. At this crucial moment, he would grab hold of even the thinnest straws.

Richard nodded, patting Perrin's shoulders before following Flowsand to get ready for the ceremony. The ritual was quite simple, with no redundant prayers or complicated procedures.

A temporary altar had been set up in the large hall, the draconic bones placed in front. Kellac and the other three clerics were assisting as well. Bevry was actually surprised at the sight, giving the man a profound stare. Kellac was rather well-known as a powerful priest in the past; becoming a level 13 priest despite being banished from the Church of the Highland Wargod was a miracle.

However, Bevry could see that Kellac was burgeoning with divine power bordering level 14. It was no easy task to produce a level 14 priest in a very short time; the only possibility was for the Eternal Dragon to be extremely powerful. The sight had actually grown the Duke's faith significantly.

Flowsand placed her hand on the book of time, a strong divine power enveloping the draconic remains. She then picked out several dim gold glimmers from the glow, converging them into the power of time. The bones then turned the colour of ash, disintegrating into dust.

Atop the Book of Time, the extracted power of time converged into a tiny hourglass that was smaller than a single finger.

An expression of joy showed on Flowsand's face as she spoke to Perrin, "The Eternal Dragon has acknowledged your sincerity, bestowing his divine grace. Come, Perrin, place your hand on the hourglass. Remember, always praise the great Eternal Dragon in

your heart!”

Perrin’s excitement was visible on a face. As a mage, despite not being very high in level, he could still sense the power of magic and the divine; he sensed a distant power of time radiating from the grains of sand, as though years were moving like clouds.

Perrin looked at his father before proceeding to the altar, reaching out to the hourglass floating in the air. The moment his fingertips touched it, the hourglass turned into a divine glow that entered his body. At the same time, information about the blessing appeared in his consciousness.

“What is it?” the Duke asked impatiently. He could not take the anticipation any longer.

Perrin carefully analysed the information, going through each sentence before his face slowly flushed with excitement, “This... Dewdrop of Life! For a year from now, my body will not age!”

## Book 2, Chapter 27 - Sacrifice

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Duke Bevry trembled slightly, a penetrating gaze landing upon Perrin. He saw a vitality in his son's body that hadn't shown itself in a long time, a faint power of time sweeping across the barren boy to dispel his aura of age and decay.

The Duke sighed heavily, "As expected." Although this period without ageing would only last a scant year, it was hope!

The ceremony had allowed Bevry to see many other things as well. The Dragon of Eternity and Light was a real entity, possessing supreme power; a ceremony presided over by a mere priest could suppress a curse from a god of Faelor. He also realised that this was a completely new model of worship; the Eternal Dragon had many demands, but he was also incredibly generous in return.

In addition, there were many types of blessings. If the Eternal Dragon's gifts were not limited to the Dewdrop of Life, then this god had unfathomable power. Perhaps Richard and Flowsand were right; maybe he really was a god above all planes.

Once the ceremony came to an end, Perrin who had overdrawn his energy while absorbing the divine grace fell into a deep sleep. Kellac looked at Flowsand with some doubt in his eyes; already a priest of the Eternal Dragon, he had some fundamental knowledge about sacrificial ceremonies. He naturally saw that most of the divine grace was absorbed by Flowsand, only a tiny bit agglomerating into a Dewdrop of Life for Perrin. With some rudimentary ability to calculate divine grace as well, he felt like strangely little grace had been obtained from the bones overall. It was as though a ceremony had already been performed with them before.

'Don't tell me you can fill your own pockets even during rituals?' The disrespectful thought had only just emerged before Kellac



nipped it in the bud. Priests could not hide anything from their gods, and the Eternal Dragon was definitely fair. Perrin receiving a Dewdrop of Life had to be His will.

Once the ceremony ended, the Duke met with Flowsand and Richard in a secret room to discuss the next stage of their cooperation.

“The Dewdrop of Life is only effective for a year,” Bevry said straightforwardly, “What do I do afterwards?”

“The blessing can be obtained repeatedly. We just have to offer something else within a year. If the level of the sacrifice is increased, the divine grace can be strengthened further. The Ripple of Life, for example, grants anywhere from three to ten additional years.”

Flowsand’s words excited the Duke, but he wouldn’t ignore the most important details. Bevry looked troubled, speaking hesitantly, “The offerings... I gave up a lot to compete for these dragon bones. I’m afraid it will be very difficult to find something similar within a year.”

“This was only Faelor’s first sacrifice,” Flowsand comforted him, “Some of the grace was wasted in creating the altar that will allow for easier communication with the Eternal Dragon. The effects of the next ritual will be much better.”

“But...” the Direwolf Duke still smiled wryly. Faelor had dragons as well, but these dragons were comparable to the ones in Norland and other planes. Even the weakest adult was not something a level 18 warrior could take on single-handedly. The only reason those from Norland could do so was their runes.

Although Bevry was a guardian of his country, compared to Norland’s saints his only advantage lay in his experience. His individual combat ability was average at best. The lack of magical development had also affected Faelor’s equipment. The same grade of equipment in Norland normally had at least one extra effect

over those from Faelor.

“The offerings don’t have to be related to dragons, Your Grace,” Flowsand reminded him with a smile, “Anything related to power — demons, devils, astral beasts, or ancient behemoths— will make for a good offering. Certain mysterious objects like meteors from other planes will be accepted as well. As for the final type of offering, it is the most difficult to obtain but also the best way to rouse His interest... Divinity!”

“Divinity!” the duke was stunned.

“To be more precise, things related to divinity. Like those with divine blood flowing through their veins, or the idols of spirits that have been worshipped for many years.”

The Duke jumped up, a murderous aura radiating from him as both hands clenched into fists. He levelled a cold glare at Flowsand; the Direwolf Family had always worshipped their ancestors, so offering one up was completely unacceptable.

Flowsand remained seated peacefully, looking at Bevry without the slightest hint of fear. The Duke took a deep breath, slowly reining in his aura as he spoke, “We of the Direwolf Family have worshipped our ancestors for generations.”

“I know, Your Grace, but do you also worship the ancestors of other families?”

The words sent a shock through Bevry’s body, forcing him into deep thought. He knew very well that these words could just have opened a gate to the abyss, but he had no choice but to step forth.

For her part, Flowsand did not wait for any reply, “There’s one final thing to remind you about. You or Perrin could conduct the next ritual yourselves, choosing your blessings. But keep in mind that the Eternal Dragon’s gifts are always given from a certain range; nobody can guarantee exactly what you will get.”

The randomness of the blessings was indeed a special

characteristic of the Eternal Dragon. Not even Richard could tell that something was wrong, and as someone who had studied the teachings of the Eternal Dragon for some time now, Bevry knew this as well.

Even Richard did not know that Flowsand could greatly limit the range of blessings as long as she paid a certain price. She did not intend to do any such thing; any gift from the Eternal Dragon was incredibly valuable, and could not be returned once granted. She absolutely wanted more of the grace to be used on Bevry himself; a strong Duke would bring her more offerings.

Seeing that the discussion of the sacrifices was done, Richard finally spoke up, “Your Grace, Flowsand and I will be leaving for Norland soon. However, we will be back quite quickly with powerful magic artefacts and equipment. My troops and followers will be left back in Faelor, and as you know I’m now an arch enemy of Red Cossack. When I’m not around, I hope you can help me take care of my followers and territory.”

The Direwolf Duke hummed an affirmative, “My personal territory doesn’t border the Bloodstained Lands right now, so it’s difficult for me to send my troops deep. As for Red Cossack... Hmm, they should be backed by Marquess Yang of the Iron Triangle Empire. It’s a difficult opponent... My advice is to withdraw your troops to the land I gave you. There’s no need to worry about Fontaine, I’ll have Moonbear station his knights on your land.

“Another method would be to leave him here for some time, but it cannot be too long.”

“How about half a year?” Richard asked.

“That won’t do, three months at most.”

“Three months, that is a little short, but... Alright then!” Richard made his decision. With the situation in the Sequoia Kingdom still unclear, he felt like Bluewater which was operating under a

balance of power was a little safer.

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Bevry didn't stay in Bluewater, instead taking Perrin and leaving quickly under the cover of the night. Someone with his identity could not be seen in the Bloodstained Lands.

Once the Direwolf Duke left, a few mysterious knights appeared outside Bluewater. One couldn't make them out clearly, but one of them was carrying an eye-catching longbow.

They stopped rather far from the city, but they could still make out a human head hung from the gates. Given their extraordinary vision and a torch illuminating the head, they could clearly see the face from afar.

"It really is Blackwing."

"He could he even kill Blackwing?!"

"Should we just storm in and avenge him?"

"Rolf is still in the city, and I heard Falcao came here recently as well."

"So what? How could they match up to Sir Chuck and Sir Phinbar?"

The knights argued quietly, their opinions varied. However, two hadn't joined in on the chatter from the start. The one on the left slowly spoke up, "What do you think, Chuck?"

"I don't think it's a good idea," Chuck's voice was abnormally hoarse and unpleasant, like two pieces of metal grating against each other, "Falcao clearly knows he cannot match up to us, but he still rushed over. It can only mean one thing; they have the confidence to deal with us. That isn't good... My beautiful pet told me that the consequences of rushing in right now would be extremely unpredictable."

Phinbar fell silent for a while before asking, "Then what do we

do?”

“We wait!” Chuck said sinisterly, “Falcao and Rolf cannot possibly be together forever. Even if they wish to do so, we can think of ways to force them out. In fact, we can use the same method that Richard fellow is using. The Golden Warflag also has quite a few caravans, and I don’t believe Falcao can stay hidden in the city if we raid a few. The moment they separate, we’ll get our opportunity!”

Phinbar nodded, saying coldly, “We should remind them that the Bloodstained Lands belong to us, to Red Cossack. If Falcao comes up guarding one of their caravans, we won’t let him return.”

One of the knights nearby couldn’t help but interrupt, “Killing Falcao would spark a war with the Golden Warflag! That wouldn’t be a good idea, should we ask our Lord for further instructions?”

Phinbar did not open his mouth, but a vicious and bloodthirsty aura frightened the man into silence.

Red Cossack and the Golden Warflag had their own unique characteristics. The former held profound strength and controlled a vast information network, while the latter was completely ruthless and vicious. Red Cossack actually didn’t have great chances in a direct war unless their backers were involved, but at that point it would likely devolve into a war between nations.

## Book 3, Chapter 28 - Return

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Phinbar and Chuck retreated stealthily. There were many reasons for this, some hidden from their subordinates. The sniper had observed that Richard's army had the power to kill a saint. In a situation where both sides had an equal number of saints, Richard had enough power to decide the outcome of the battle.

Chuck's astute sense of danger had actually saved them. The assumption of equal numbers was actually wrong; Lord Moonbear's presence would have overwhelmingly changed the tides of the battle.

The situation in the Bloodstained Lands grew even more chaotic over the next month. The fundamental balance had been uprooted, with several huge caravans from the Golden Warflag looted in quick succession. They soon started targeting Red Cossack in return, both sides erupting into war in every corner of the Bloodstained Lands. The complete chaos did no good for either side, rendering all the traditional trading routes far more dangerous than normal. Both sides were losing at least 10,000 gold every day.

Richard himself had attacked only once in this period of time, annihilating a group of bandits that were only a hundred strong. Most of his time was spent preparing the teleportation gate that would lead them back to Norland, as well as designing a rune set for his return.

A mysterious fleet of carriages arrived at Bluewater at the end of the month, moving directly into his territory. Richard had already marked out a zone at the centre where his slaves had dug a pit. After about half a month, a strange stone tower was built there.

This was a Lighthouse of Time!

All the materials had come from the one at the original Archeron base. The broodmother's humanoid drones had taken it apart,

moving it all to the Bloodstained Lands. With more than a month since she last sent soldiers his way, she had amassed more than a hundred humanoids as well as a few dozen throwers and wind wolves.

Baron Forza had heaved a sigh of relief when he received the news that Richard was in the Bloodstained Lands. Only a few dozen people were guarding the Archeron base; after all, he was beaten so badly he couldn't afford to send any more. They had been nothing when compared to the broodmother's army, easily annihilated by the humanoids and throwers.

The dismantling of the lighthouse was a sufficient display of the advantages of giving the humanoids high intelligence and dexterity. They were already no different from more foolish humans, and the two elites could even be considered smart by normal standards. Over a hundred of them working together had managed to quickly take the entire thing apart, transporting it away.

As the Lighthouse of Time was made of many precious materials, the cost of building one was just far too immense. Thankfully, the people of Faelor— or at least Baron Forza— did not know of its function. He had no interest in a stone tower that did not match his aesthetics in the slightest, which made things easier for Richard.

However, a small uproar had erupted in Bluewater. Although it looked a little too small to live in, making integral facets like a laboratory, spell boosts, and defence unlikely, it still appeared to be a mage tower from the outside. A mage tower appearing in the city was not a good thing, even if it was at the border. It would gift a lot of control over to Richard.

It took some effort for Richard to make it all go away. He ended up pretending to unwittingly reveal that the strange thing was meant for prayers, able to transmit faith more distinctly. He didn't mention whether this was for ancestral worship of something else,

but it was enough to pacify his old friends who had come calling. Amon and Devon had also sent over mages when the tower was being built, and they concluded that the patterns on the tower were some sort of unknown divine language and not a magic formation. Since the tower was only as high as a regular archery tower and posed no threat to their territories, the matter was soon forgotten.

Richard was finished with the teleportation gate by the time the Lighthouse of Time was completed. He calculated it could only send three people back to Norland, using up all 300 magic crystals he currently possessed. At least in the short term, he could not get any more.

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Late in the night. With the Book of Time in hand, Flowsand ascended to the top floor of the lighthouse. A silent chant caused the book to emit a golden ray of light, the torches nearby starting to burn with a pale gold flame. Blurred scenes seemed to flash in these flames on occasion.

The Lighthouse of Time had finally been ignited once more.

A two-storey building had been attached to the lighthouse, housing Richard's teleportation gate. The building had a massive amount of soldiers stationed to protect it, and a large number of magic materials were stored as well.

A large formation with strange patterns had already been prepared in the hall, a standard planar teleportation spell. These patterns contained information about Norland's coordinates, their main function to embed Faelor's own into the spatial channel. That way, he could effectively isolate himself from the senses of the local gods.

Looking at the undulations from the lighthouse, Richard took a deep breath and crouched down to place his hand on a magic crystal. The crystal slowly brightened under the guidance of his



own magic, pure mana turning into blazing streams of light that flowed through the formation as they set off all the other crystals along the way. A moment later, all the crystals dumped a great amount of mana into the gate, slowly forming a portal in the centre of the formation.

Behind this portal was Norland! Flowsand had said the destination would be the Church of the Eternal Dragon in Faust.

Richard was beside himself with joy as he looked at the gate, wondering how everyone back in Norland was doing. However, he quickly began to have second thoughts. Given the Blessing of Unhurriedness that slowed time in Faelor, less than a month had passed back in Norland. Even if he'd been drifting around in spacetime due to the turbulence for a long time, not more than two months could have passed. What could happen in two months?

When Flowsand entered the hall and saw the portal glimmering splendidly, she was dazed. Inadvertently, she revealed a hint of sorrow.

“We can return!” Richard said, his elated voice booming.

“Yes, we can...” her smile was forced.

Richard looked at Flowsand, puzzled, “What’s with you? Aren’t you happy?”

She immediately hummed and returned to normal pushing back, “I’m only feeling bad about these offerings and magic crystals! The lighthouse is damaged, so they’re only enough for a single round trip! It’s impossible to bring someone else! Just hope you can earn the costs back with your runes and those goods, or we won’t have enough money to return in the future. Also, don’t say I didn’t warn you. Upgrading the passage will be an even larger expense!”

Richard’s excitement completely died down. Amidst all the massive risk that came with planar war, one of the most important aspects was the huge cost of building and maintaining portals. A

temporary gate like this one, designed to be hidden from the gods of the plane, would be even more expensive. A hundred magic crystals were needed for a single person's round trip. By Norland's standards, this was 75,000 gold! This was why he and Flowsand were the only ones returning.

Richard had already made all sorts of preparations. He gathered all of his followers before leaving, leaving them with instructions for when he was gone. Carrying two specially-made magic sealing boxes, he entered the portal after Flowsand.

As the light enveloped him, only one thought was left behind, 'Norland... I'm finally back!'

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Planar teleportation could be instant or it could take some time, the largest known duration in history being a month. However, no matter how much time passed the person being teleported felt like only an instant had passed. The grand mages of the Deepblue that studied this phenomenon labelled the time difference stolen time. However, nobody knew who the thief was.

Spacetime turbulence was extremely complicated, hiding far too many secrets. This was the domain of the Eternal Dragon; at the very least, one needed to be able to shuttle between planes to perform research in the field. Not even every legendary mage had this ability.

Even as Richard was preparing for the teleportation, the situation in island 7-2 was quickly losing balance. The Archeron branch families were mostly at the bottom of noble society, most of them unworthy of their titles and living the lives of commoners. In Faust, however, they had seen true luxury and prestige, the privilege of the upper class. This change in position was not something everyone could handle; all the children of the branch families wanted such lives.

They hated the influential nobles, hated their privileged and

luxurious lives. However, they did not hate privilege itself; the root of their dissatisfaction came from the fact that these privileges did not belong to them.

Now, however, right before the eyes of these vulgar children of the branch families, was a chance at instant success.

Offerings!

Something they had never even dared to think about was lingering before their eyes, resounding in their ears, shaking their very hearts. In the eyes of the branches, even the lowest of ceremonies was a path to success. They had no idea what offerings did, nor did they understand how the gifts of the Eternal Dragon were things that left most people unsure of whether to laugh or cry. In all their ignorance, they felt like offerings were the most effective way to solve all problems. Perhaps the only way.

Large quantities of offerings were sitting on the island, and the barrier to entry was just a feeble old butler. Temptation was always around, and for those who desired a better position this one was irresistible! Every day's wait was a huge test of their patience.

The representatives of the branch families, those monkeys who carried the Archeron name, banded together once more. With a list of the offerings in hand, they requested to enter the warehouse to check the quantities of the offerings.

And amongst the people leading them, the most enthusiastic was the newly promoted leader of the foot soldiers, Erwin.

## Book 3, Chapter 29 - Riot

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Hundreds of branch family members had gathered together, intent on entering the castle's warehouse. The old steward hastened over to stop them in front of the gate, righteously berating those who wanted to cause a scene. However, his solemn face hid endless worry.

There was only one thing he was concerned about; the difference in numbers was far too large!

Standing opposite the hundreds of troublemakers were only twenty of Gatón's personal guard. Many of these guards had been chosen from the branch families as well; if not for the sake of expanding his influence, the old steward would never have brought them out. With them being the kin of these opponents, nobody could predict how they would act.

"What are you trying to do? This is Lord Gatón's personal warehouse, anyone who dares to intrude is rebelling!" The man's voice was still stern, but that had already lost its effects.

"Rebelling?" Erwin stood out, raising the list of offerings high in the air and yelling, "You're just a servant, and in front of you are the Archerons! What right do you have to order us? Besides, you're the actual rebel! The list of offerings is right here, offerings that belong to the Archeron Family. If you're completely innocent, why won't you let us in to check? With so many pairs of eyes around, who would dare do anything in the storeroom?"

Erwin let out a breath, his pitch going up an entire octave, "I think less than half of the offerings are left in the warehouse! The rest has been turned to gold that is lining this old bastard's pocket! Lord Gatón trusted him so much... Now that he's not around, how can we Archerons let him steal our Lord's most precious wealth? Don't you all agree?"

A few hundred people shouted boisterously, their momentum

unstoppable!

The old butler had not expected these people to be so roguish, for the situation to fall completely out of hand. Even more unnerving was the fact that the free Archerons that hastened over to protect the island of their own volition had not appeared at all. While there were few of them, each was a man of valour. They would be enough to terrify these little monkeys in front of him.

However, in the moment they were needed the most, none of them had appeared.

The old butler's mind filled with gloom. Perhaps only the three great heads of the Archeron Family could control these free soldiers right now... But then, the appearance of any single one would change the situation completely.

The old steward did not respond to Erwin's 'interrogation', only flashing a bitter smile as he stated slowly, "Do not forget Lord Gatton's methods, and do not forget the number of lives he has reaped. The miracles my Lord can perform..."

Thud! Erwin suddenly charged forth, mercilessly punching the steward's face. The steely fist sent blood splattering everywhere, the old man sent flying into the warehouse gates with a low groan. His nose was completely broken, one of his eyes swelling up rapidly until he couldn't open it anymore.

Swing! Gatton's guards were caught unprepared, but they quickly unsheathed their weapons. However, they wavered when it came time to use them. After all, the people ahead really were members of the Archeron Family.

"We're only guarding Lord Gatton's wealth, the Archerons' true wealth! All true Archerons, fight with us!" Erwin yelled once more, raising his arm. Hundreds of branch family members charged forth, pushing past Gatton's guards into the storehouse. These guards were pushed all over the place, but were at a loss for what to do. Without orders from the old steward, they just couldn't

attack members of the family.

The steward himself was unable to give orders. Erwin's expression was dark as he mercilessly kicked at the man's ribs. Large amounts of blood spurted out of the butler's mouth and nose with every kick, leaving him with no opportunity to speak at all. The knight was attacking viciously without any seeming intent to enter the warehouse, instead kicking the old butler like he had gone insane. It was only then that one of the guards realised something was off and darted over, full of bloodlust as he brandished his sword. This finally caused Erwin to stop. Still, he gave the guard a long, cold look that was filled with boundless hatred.

The guard helped the old man up, not cowering at all as his gaze at Erwin grew denser with bloodlust. He was a veteran with dozens of lives on his head and wouldn't be scared by a mere knight in training. However, he knew the situation was currently out of control; their first priority was to save the old steward.

The guards escorted the steward away, leaving the branch families with what they wished for. However, things were not as expected. They did see numerous offerings, but there were no piles of gold. Outside of the offerings, weapons, and equipment, there was nothing in the warehouse. They just couldn't believe that Gatón, who regularly went out to planar wars and always won, the man who had conquered one of Faust's islands and possessed four planes, was actually so poor!

They quickly came to the same conclusion. Gatón had to have a secret warehouse, his wealth piled up like mountains! They had gone green with envy and wanted to loot everything, but it all seemed to be for naught!

"The upper levels!" Erwin shouted again, his hysterical voice overpowering all noise, "The upper levels of the castle are restricted! All of Gatón's treasures must be hidden there, they belong to all of us Archerons!"

“To the upper levels!”

“Take what is ours!”

Cries rang out in quick succession, the bestial character of the Archeron bloodline exploding forth. Most of the bandits flowed like a river towards the upper level, while some were smart enough to leave the castle and keep the offerings they had already looted. Most of the people who got nothing charged up with bloodshot eyes.

“What do you think you’re doing? Is this a rebellion?” A clear berating voice immediately intimidated everyone.

In front of the stairs leading to the upper levels was a tall, graceful figure. This was Demi, a girl who was akin to burning flames; beautiful like fire. Her eyes were blazing, the staff in her hand glowing in preparation to launch a spell at any moment. Behind her were Wennington and Venica, the three blocking the path of the hundreds of crazed monkeys. While the monkeys could tear them to shreds in an instant, they showed no signs of giving way, no fear. Deep within each pair of eyes was boiling lava!

“A rebellion? Of course not! We just want to take what is ours!” a voice shouted. It was still Erwin.

“The upper levels are restricted to my father, Marquess Gaton. Anyone who dares cross the line will be killed without hesitation!” Demi spat out murderously.

Erwin stood out, his expression dark. He quickly made his way towards the three, all the while shouting, “Everything here belongs to the Archeron Family!”

“What are you? A tiny foot soldier and you call yourself an Archeron?” Demi stared coldly at Erwin, voice dripping with disdain. She suddenly shouted out, “True Archerons use their swords and scars, trading the blood of their enemies on true battlefields to prove themselves!”

These words caused many of the people who had charged over to freeze, looking hesitant.

But Erwin suddenly took a step forward, landing a fierce punch on Demi's abdomen!

The girl hadn't expected him to actually attack. The punch was very heavy, causing her innards to churn. As a cursemaster, her physique wasn't exactly great. How could she withstand the full-power punch of a warrior?

Crimson blood flowed from the corners of her mouth, and she couldn't help but crumble to the ground. She suddenly saw the cold glint of a dagger from the corner of her eye! Wracked with immense pain, Demi's mind was moving slowly. Her battle instincts warned her of the danger, but she still couldn't believe it.

A dagger? Why a dagger? Did these people plan on killing her, killing Gaton's blood on his own island? Something so absurd was about to happen?

Erwin's mind was filled with brutal thoughts of longing. Demi's impressive breasts were practically squeezing out at her neckline, the girl's amazing body causing his blood to surge downwards. All he wanted to do was to tear off her clothes then and there; in the past, he wouldn't have been able to touch a single finger from her!

However, he pushed away these tempting thoughts and slid the dagger out of his sleeve. He knew full well how valuable the offerings in the warehouse were; what was the difference between robbing Gaton's offerings and killing his children? He might as well eliminate everything completely! Besides, a single stab would tie everyone here to the same wagon!

'It's not just the Archeron children that have ambition!' a voice yelled out deep in Erwin's heart. His gaze turned icy, body filled with lightning strength. Wennington and Venica had never been on a true battlefield before, so their reactions were too slow. They still hadn't figured out why Demi suddenly collapsed.



This was a chance! A chance that would disappear in a second! Fire blazed in Erwin's chest as he prepared to thrust fiercely.

However, a hand suddenly stuck out from the side and pulled Demi who was about to collapse away. It was long and beautiful, the gauntlet and bracer that adorned it of the same style. Flame patterns clearly drew the outline of a crest, that of Earl Alice.

Erwin looked up, stunned, but all he saw was another hand rapidly moving towards his face.

Pak! An incomparably crisp slap rang out!

Erwin grew dizzy, his vision blurring. A ringing sound masked his hearing, and one of his cheeks quickly swelled up. However, he still managed to see the person in front of him, remembering her name and identity. A 'You bitch!' was swallowed, turning into a terrified but angry "YOU!"

## Book 3, Chapter 30 - Temporary Tranquility

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This woman was Earl Alice's most capable assistant, her right hand. A distant cousin, Fuschia possessed an unknown bloodline. Although not good at commanding troops, her talent in combat was said to be terrifying. Still in her early twenties, she was already level 19.

Erwin himself was only level 11. Even in a completely open field, an entire squadron of people like him wouldn't be able to kill her.

Before he could even swallow his cries, the palm that had just brushed past his face flew back again, making a sharp, clear sound. The other side of his face began to swell up as well.

However, that was only the beginning. Fuschia waved her hands incessantly, slap after resounding slap flying across Erwin's face. Erwin wanted to hold tightly onto his dagger that was already unsheathed, but the last dregs of his rationality told him that such a transgression would only end with him being beheaded on the spot. With Lady Fuschia's status, nothing much would happen if she killed a mere soldier like him even in normal times, much less in this situation.

He thus forced down the resentment boiling deep in his heart, tolerating all the slaps with the patience of a turtle. However, he was cursing crazily in the bottom of his heart, 'You bitch! One day I'll fuck you half dead and tear out your cunt!'

Fuschia's expression was cold as she landed more than a dozen slaps on Erwin before kicking him away. Looking at the remaining branch members who were still stunned, she snorted in cold disdain, looking past them and shouting in the direction they had come from, "Sua, come out! Your methods are overstepping the Archeron bottom line!"

Clap! Clap! Clap! Baron Sua quickly walked out of a corner, his voice full of praise "Lady Fuschia does indeed have shocking

power, able to block hundreds of Archerons alone.”

Fuschia wasn't even slightly interested in his hypocrisy, pointing to Demi as she said coldly, “These are Gaton's children, pure Archerons. They cannot be hurt by internal strife, that is a bottom line! Listen clearly; I have no interest in bargaining with you. I don't care what you do in private, but this kind of thing cannot happen again! This is a matter of the family's pride!”

Sua shrugged his shoulders, speaking with a smile, “If I remember correctly, Lady Fuschia, I don't think you're an Archeron. At the very least, your bloodline abilities don't come from the Archeron bloodline. Furthermore, these people in front of you are Archerons as well, I have no way to command them.”

A look of derision showed up on Fuschia's face as she condescendingly swept her eyes across the crowd. Sua noticed her expression and could not help but laugh, “Don't belittle these people, Miss Fuschia, they are Archerons as well. You cannot defeat them on your own. As beautiful as you are... Who knows, some unpleasant things may happen to you when you lose. Even if you die, you might not be able to escape it.”

The threat was incomparably malicious, even causing Demi to pale. “However,” Sua added, “This situation isn't impossible to resolve. I just need those skeletal remains.”

“You're using this kind of thing to threaten me?” Fuschia asked indifferently, “If I want to escape, do you think you lot can stop me? So long as I escape today, all of you—that includes you, Sua—you best be prepared to suffer my vengeance for the rest of your existence! Your lives will be mine, and so will those of everyone related to you!”

Sua's expression turned cold, “You might not be able to escape.”

“Perhaps,” Fuschia combed her long chestnut hair and continued, “But that doesn't matter. I've already delivered a list of everyone on the island to my Lady. She already promised me

before I came here that she would avenge me if I could not leave. The families of everyone here will be targeted by her army. My Lady's style has always been to wipe out all enemies."

The threat was delivered monotonously, but it was anything but. Fuschia was right; the one thing that could match Alice's reputation at war was her decisiveness. There was no lack of places her army had turned into death zones.

Sua grew more serious, stating dully, "Alice is only an earl."

These words pointed out the difference between Sauron and Alice. Alice's lands were at the border of the Sacred Alliance, very far from Faust. She would have to pass through dozens of other nobles to make it here. He was actually giving Erwin and the others some courage, only that he wasn't making it so obvious.

"When my Lady was still a small knight, many people were already marquesses. Now that she's an earl, many are still marquesses."

Fuschia's words caused darkness to sweep across Sua's face. He squinted in her direction, asking coldly, "The Earl wishes to take over this island?"

"No, I only care about Lord Gaton's children," Fuschia replied.

Sua nodded, "Very well then, at the very least it seems like our families won't come into conflict here."

Fuschia nodded, "I have no interest in a conflict with a third party in someone else's territory."

There was a faint sneer to her voice, but Sua pretended like he hadn't heard that and left with his people. Fuschia didn't want to force them too far either; the Baron was not easy to deal with, and Earl Goliath had his own people on the island as well.

If one looked at things in the long term, they would know that numerous enemies were still hanging around the island, waiting for the opportunity to attack. Many amongst them could take

down island 7-2 right now, but they did not do so. Outside of a lack of desire to suffer the attacks of the remaining Archerons, an important reason for their restraint was that island 7-2 had only recently been blessed by the Eternal Dragon. Any attacks would draw the old dragon's ire, possibly even causing the Church of the Eternal Dragon to interfere personally.

The branch families gradually retreated before Fuschia, even Erwin struggling his way out. However, worry already clouded her eyes. This crisis had come to pass, but nobody could guarantee what would happen the next time. She was just one person, it would be impossible to resist hundreds of Archerons. Furthermore, both Sua and Earl Goliath had followers who were comparable to her in strength.

This was a complicated situation. Behind the chaotic riots were the silhouettes of many rich and powerful families. Fuschia alone could not reverse this situation, nor could Earl Alice herself...

The bandits finally retreated, making sure to leave no offering behind. They even swept through the entire basement of the castle once more before they escaped, taking away anything of value.

## Book 3, Chapter 31 - Inheritance

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It was only after the last bandit had disappeared from their view that Fuschia turned around to look at Demi, Wennington, and Venica, “Go to Earl Alice’s territory, she can protect all of you.”

“No, I’m not going anywhere! This is my father’s castle, it has the Archeron cemetery!” Demi said stubbornly.

Fuschia frowned, “They wouldn’t dare mess with the Archeron graveyard, this stubbornness has no meaning!”

Demi forcefully shook her head, “No, I want to stay here. I could die wherever I go. This is Father’s territory, only occupied for a while by these thieves. If I get scared for my life and leave, I’m basically letting them have the place!”

Fuschia was slightly taken aback; she hadn’t thought this young lady would be so knowledgeable.

.....

When Richard stepped out of the portal in the Church of the Eternal Dragon, he had no idea about the situation he would be facing. The portal came out in the portal room of the Church, a region where commoners were forbidden.

When Flowsand and Richard walked out, even the priests guarding the place were utterly shocked. These people were supposed to be lost in the myriad planes!

Flowsand didn’t let Richard head back to the island immediately, instead bringing him along to visit high priestess Ferlyn. On one hand, she wanted to register Faelor with the Church of the Eternal Dragon, getting a serial number for the plane. This would strengthen its connection to Norland, lowering both the cost of teleportation and chances of failure. The other was to find out the truth behind how they had disappeared to Faelor.

Ferlyn told Richard that his ceremony’s blessings had been

interrupted. However, she didn't mention who the source of the interruption was, only advising Richard to concern himself more with matters in Faust.

Her words left Richard feeling strange and secretly unsettled. He tried his best to calm his anxious heart, listening to a beautiful cleric in front of him regale him about the recent events in Faust. As he heard more and more, his expression warped.

Gaton was stuck in the Rosie plane, most of his army with him? Wouldn't that leave all the Archeron lands bare, including island 7-2?

Besides... could he come back at all? And even if he could, when would it be? Endless questions lingered in Richard's thoughts, growing more passionate and fiery until he felt like something was searing his heart. The mild stings didn't seem to be much, but he soon found it hard to breathe.

Gaton Archeron... Someone so capable, so carefree, rugged, and bold... How could he be sabotaged to the point that there was no news of him left?

He quickly stood up, but then forced himself to slowly take his seat once more. Flowsand was concerned by his nasty complexion, asking, "Richard! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, I have no emotional attachments to Gaton," Richard said nonchalantly, almost no change in his voice. He then added, "I just don't like when something that belongs to me is taken by someone else."

Flowsand didn't believe any of it, but she still nodded seriously.

Richard thought things over for a while before speaking to her, "I need some help."

She patiently listened to all of his requests and ideas, thinking about them for a while before saying, "It shouldn't be a problem. However, this is the Church of the Eternal Dragon. If you wish for

some help, there needs to be something given in return.”

“I’m prepared.”

She nodded, walking out from the side hall.

Richard suddenly turned to the young cleric the moment Flowsand left, “Can you give me a basin of ice water?”

The young lady looked suspiciously at Richard before turning around and leaving for a moment. When she returned, she had a bronze basin filled with clear water in her hand. Ice was floating on the top.

Richard picked up the basin and moved close to a window that overlooked half of Faust. Although he looked calm, the sight of the island floating in the sky caused the corners of his eyes to twitch gently. He lifted the basin up high, pouring the freezing cold water over his head! The liquid trickled down his forehead to his face, making it down his body to eventually reach his leg. The water took away a bulk of his body’s heat, also easing the twitching of his eyes. It was a way to force himself to calm down.

The cleric behind him was stunned by this scene, covering her mouth.

Richard calmly walked in front of her, gently placing the basin down without making a sound. He then walked to the boxes he had personally carried in from Faelor, opening them. The magic sealing boxes were separated into five drawers, ingots of metal neatly lined up in the first two. They were an ashy silver head on, but looking at them from an angle one could see a myriad of glittering colours.

These were enchanted cloudforged ingots, extremely refined and treated with magic. The treatment had lightened the metal while maintaining its strength, so it was not inferior to black iron. It was a legendary resource, more than ten times the value of a similar volume of gold. Cloudforged was abundant in Faelor, but quite scarce



in Norland. Of course, there were other materials that went the other way.

This cloudfire that Richard had brought back to Norland was worth more than a million gold coins!

.....

When Flowsand returned to the hall, two great priests and a powerful paladin were following behind. The paladin emitted a faint aura of power, causing Richard to shudder uncontrollably the moment he entered. Richard immediately realised that this was someone almost at the legendary realm, unfathomable strength almost bursting out from his body.

When Flowsand reached Richard, she introduced the people around her, “These two are great priestesses Jacqueline and Noelene. They will be answering your questions about sacrifices and planar passages. And this is Ferdinand, deputy captain of the Eternal Dragon Paladins.”

Richard bowed to them, saying courteously, “Thank you all for helping me.”

Priestess Jacqueline smiled elegantly in response. She looked very young, but she was already level 18. Noelene was the same, while Ferdinand was level 20. There were many people like him who were forever stuck at level 20, unable to break through into the legendary realm. The Church of the Eternal Dragon had many people of such calibre, able to make for an unbelievably powerful force if in Faelor. Such was the difference between the two planes.

## Book 3, Chapter 32 - Inheritance(2)

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Richard cast a deep glance towards Ferdinand once more, immediately feeling some pain in his eyes. His heart skipped a beat; only after he reached level 12 on Faelor could he figure out how powerful others were.

However, Richard did not know that it was actually quite easy for Ferdinand to advance to the legendary realm. He only needed Ferlyn to invest some divine grace in him; after all, he was her guardian.

Turning to the members of the clergy, Richard asked what circumstances could destroy a planar portal and eliminate a plane's registration from the Church. Jacqueline mentioned many situations for the former: a powerful wave of spacetime turbulence could destroy weaker portals, so the materials used in the construction were extremely important. However, nobody had an endless supply of resources; they needed to balance durability and cost.

As for the serial number of the plane disappearing, she mentioned that it had only occurred twice in the past. One was the complete destruction of the plane, while the other was if the owner of the plane gave it up. However, one could only give a plane up if it was almost completely barren with no value, or the Church of the Eternal Dragon would not allow it. As for the disappearance of the Rosie plane, it did not fall under either of the situations and she couldn't think of another way either. Perhaps the true answer could only be obtained by seeking out the Mensas.

Richard pondered over things for a moment before speaking, "Alright, I understand. Now, I have two requests of the Church. One, I want to set up the portal to Faelor in the Church, perhaps even in this hall, for one year. Also, I want to apply for some paladins to help me guard island 7-2."

Jacqueline and Noelene discussed things softly for a while before glancing at Flowsand and speaking up, “We shouldn’t accept either of those, the Church of the Eternal Dragon does not interfere in mortal struggles. However, you once performed a ceremony that surpassed a greater sacrifice, and caused remarkable growth in Flowsand and the Book of Time. We can make an exception for you, allowing you to obtain the Church’s help at the cost of offerings.

“For your first request, we will use time as the standard unit. A lesser offering of adequate value for six months, or an intermediate offering for one year. One year is also the maximum amount of time for which we shall guard island 7-2. Because this island was recently blessed by the Eternal Dragon, any attacks within the year can be considered disrespect to the Church. As for the specific plan for defence, you can ask Lord Ferdinand.”

Ferdinand then took over, “I can give you fifty paladins, stationing them on the island. However, my knights only guarantee that the island will not be invaded by other families. I will not interfere in the internal strife of the Archerons.”

Richard frowned, “50 seems a little inadequate.”

Ferdinand smiled in response, “We can add more. Every additional fifty will cost a lesser sacrifice.”

Richard’s eyebrows wrinkled even further as he quieted down, silently thinking and making calculations. He did not shy away from the process of pondering over the issue, something that caused the priests and the near-legendary guardian to secretly nod. There was no such thing as too cautious when dealing with three lesser sacrifices.

Ten entire minutes passed, Richard’s expression growing wanner as he thought things over. There were far too many things to consider; even with the blessing of wisdom, he took a long time to come to a conclusion, “Alright. Fifty paladins it is, then. One year.”

Ferdinand nodded with approval, asking with a smile, “Alright, what about the sacrifices?”

“I wonder if these things can substitute?” Richard put the two drawers of enchanted cloudfire in front of them. Noelene was a master appraiser herself; she took out a piece of the cloudfire and looked at it carefully, “Hmm... Enchanted cloudfire, exceptional quality. These things are worth two lesser sacrifices, but it still isn’t enough.”

There was no fixed conversion rate between gold and offerings. The value of an offering fluctuated between thirty and seventy thousand gold coins each. Noelene was willing to consider these stacks of cloudfire to be worth 50,000 each, a reasonable price.

Richard thought for a while and agreed, “I plan to host a rune convention in two days. Some of my runes will be sold at that time, and I should be able to return what I owe then.”

Jacqueline smiled, “A future saint runemaster’s promise is far more valuable than some gold. It’s alright, we can wait.”

Priestess Noelene, who had been silent nearly all this while, suddenly spoke up, “Richard, can you push your convention back by a day?”

“Why?” One day didn’t seem to make for too much of a difference, but Richard sensed another meaning in her words.

“You Archerons have been in quite a bit of trouble recently,” the priestess said indifferently, “I think I can find a few supporters to let you conduct it smoothly in three days. More importantly, the royal runemaster Lunor is releasing his new runes in three days as well. I hear that the royal family is thinking of hiring another royal runemaster. If you can shine brightly enough at the time, you might be chosen for the position. I’m sure I don’t need to explain what that status will bring you.”

Richard thought silently for a moment before saying resolutely,

“Alright!”

The fast and easy agreement left Noelene a little curious, “Are you not afraid of offending Lunor?”

All Richard could see at this time was the Deepblue Aria, a dazzling mystery that seemed far beyond his reach. Hearing Noelene’s question, he let out a light sigh, “He’s someone I will ultimately surpass, it’s only a matter of time. Besides, don’t you want to pit me against him? This should be a prerequisite to becoming a royal runemaster.”

Noelene’s eyes sparkled and she smiled, “You’re very smart! I look forward to your performance.”

A short while later, Richard left the Church of the Eternal Dragon under the escort of two paladins, walking towards the teleportation temple. Just as they left the church building and stepped on the road leading to the temple, a few youths dressed in bright, luxurious clothing walked in his direction with dozens of high-ranking guards.

Just as they brushed past each other, one of them noticed Richard and suddenly gasped in surprise, “Isn’t this Richard Archeron?! He’s back from another plane?”

## Book 3, Chapter 33 - Inheritance(3)

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“Richard?” A voice rang out from the crowd, a rather dashing young man dressed in mage’s attire; not many of his age were truly established mages. His gaze was sharp as an eagle, quickly landing on Richard as he shouted, “Stop!”

Richard instinctively sensed hostility from this youth, his gaze freezing over as he stopped in his tracks. He looked at the young mage, trying to gauge his power as he looked on to see what would happen next. Precision slowly unravelled this opponent’s powers, revealing that he was roughly around level 13. The youth’s mana was rather pure, leaning slightly towards elemental magic. Richard also sensed that the mage possessed a similar air of calmness and accuracy, traits only runemasters possessed.

The young mage blocked Richard’s path, sizing him up a few times before asking coldly, “Are you Richard Archeron?”

In no mood to answer, Richard quickly made up his mind and said nonchalantly, “I don’t want to answer, step aside.”

The young mage’s expression changed in an instant, his face distorting sinisterly, but he quickly managed to turn that into a look of calm arrogance. He laughed icily, “I’m the best student of the royal runemaster, Lunor. My name is Foster. I hear you proclaimed yourself a future saint? What a joke! A young kid who hasn’t had a single rune convention to his name calls himself a future saint runemaster? Do you even know what a saint runemaster is?”

Another youth chimed in, “The Archerons are only a bunch of worthless upstarts who can only boast!”

“Exactly! You lot are all brawn, no brain. What would you know about runecrafting? Wasn’t Gaton tricked into heading to a plane and trapped there forever?” one more shouted in mockery.

“Look, this guy has a dagger! I’ve never seen a mage that needs a blade before!”

Despite their best attempts, the incessant efforts of these youths did not get to Richard. “Step aside,” he said indifferently.

Foster’s complexion soured further, his gaze falling upon the long dagger on Richard’s back. He laughed sarcastically, “This is the first time I’ve seen a runemaster with a blade. Would a true mighty runemaster need something as crude as that to act cool? I heard the Archerons had no taste, but I would never have guessed that it was this bad. Bah, that blade is weak! I suggest you spend some money to get something better!”

As he said that, Foster stretched out his hand to poke Richard in the chest, as if he was training some acolyte. Richard let out an icy smirk, right hand twitching without control. If the mage’s fingers were to land on his clothes, he would chop them off in a flash. That would be a devastating blow to any runemaster.

Hand still half-raised, Foster suddenly felt a chilling sensation in his heart. His mind went numb, his muscles stiffening until he was paralysed. This was a sense of danger so strong that it felt like he could die!

His face blanched, and it was all he could do to stop his hand from trembling as he put it down without caring about his reputation. He shot Richard a bewildered look, unsure if the danger he just sensed had come from the Archeron youth.

Richard looked towards him and laughed, “Pretty good perception. Pity you have no guts, and your appraisal skills are poor—”

“Extinction!” a cry rang out from the side before Richard could even finish.

A violent gale suddenly buffeted the corner and a buff young man rushed towards Richard. His eyes were blazing as he spoke in a

menacing tone, “Who are you?! Why do you have Sinclair’s Extinction? Where is she?”

Foster immediately stepped aside, his complexion changing. He looked helplessly at Richard’s blade, realising upon closer inspection that this dagger had a faint aura that made him feel a violent chill. Extinction was a famous legendary weapon that would be valued in any family; it was no wonder that Richard said his appraisal skills were poor.

Being a dagger used by assassins, Extinction had a minimal aura. Those who did not know would think it was a simple, crude, and ordinary blade. This failure was like a slap on Foster’s face.

Richard’s gaze shifted to the burly youth. He sized the man up a few times before asking, “You’re a Schumpeter?”

The man’s voice grew more stern, his fighting spirit erupting from his fists, “Let me ask you again, why are you in possession of Sinclair’s blade?”

If not for the two paladins beside Richard, he would have taken action long ago. The paladins themselves weren’t powerful enough to worry him, but they were backed by the Church of the Eternal Dragon. Even their family head, Dario, would not dare to lay a hand on them.

Richard looked at the young man once again, suddenly smiling, “I don’t think you have the guts to do anything here. Get out of my way!”

“You!” The young man gritted his teeth, his fists clenched so tight that his knuckles were almost green.

The two paladins guarding Richard stepped forward at that moment, “Sir Richard is an important guest of the Church of the Eternal Dragon, do not block his path. Insist on doing so and Lord Ferdinand will be paying your family a visit!”

The faces of both the Schumpeter youth and Foster turned ashen.



They had no choice but to give way; a small break in the normalcy of Faust wasn't worth much, but angering the Church of the Eternal Dragon would land them in severe trouble from their families. Their arrogance could not be shown to everyone; fighting a power beyond one's capabilities was absolute foolishness.

The Schumpeter man finally realised Richard's identity, his eyes filled with vengeance. Just as Richard was passing him, he suddenly exclaimed, "You better spend your whole life hiding in Faust! The moment you take one step out, I, Micah, will definitely kill you!"

Richard laughed, not even turning around as he responded, "Childish. If the opportunity arises, I would rather see you on a planar battlefield. I will eliminate the entire Schumpeter Family, just like I did Sinclair."

Micah was stunned, his face turning white as a sheet while his vengeful eyes almost pierced through Richard's back! He finally had news about Sinclair, something he had desired for a while now, but he didn't dare to rush up and fight. One thing was clear to him. If Richard dared to parade around Faust with Sinclair's dagger, then whatever level he was at he would not be a match. It didn't matter that he was a level 15 warrior who was an outstanding genius amongst the Schumpeter youths.

Foster suddenly spoke up from behind Richard, "Master Lunor will be holding a rune convention in three days. It will also be my official promotion to become a true runemaster. If you're interested, I can send you an invite."

"Not interested. I have my own convention at the same time," Richard responded nonchalantly.

Foster squinted his eyes, snorting loudly. He seethed out a pleantry from the gaps between his clenched teeth, "I hope people will attend your convention!"

.....

Richard's sudden arrival shocked most people on island 7-2. He saw many unfamiliar faces the moment he stepped out, amongst them footsoldiers, young nobles, and some people of unknown origin.

"Richard!" they cried out when they saw him, "How could it be him? Richard is back!"

Their faces were filled with astonishment and panic. Two people even reached for their weapons, while another ran back towards the floating island to report to someone.

He registered all their expressions and reactions in a flash. These people were stood idly in front of the portal, walking up and down; clearly, their task was to keep watch. Their eyes had actually grown fierce the moment they realised his identity; the only reason they didn't dare make a move was the two paladins who emerged behind him.

Even though he had been informed about the events on the island before, Richard was still somewhat shocked by how easily these people were running amok. A seething rage surged forth from his heart, but he still remained cool and expressionless on the outside.

He took big strides towards the castle but was quickly blocked by a few people. "Wait! This is the Archeron Family's floating island, you cannot enter as you please," someone said with a frivolous smile.

"I am Richard Archeron."

"I know that you are Young Master Richard..." Someone else only managed to get half his sentence out before he was stopped by his companion's death stare.

An armoured soldier stepped forward, sword in hand as he gazed at Richard with hostility. "Everyone knows that Young Master Richard died in spacetime turbulence!" he grunted, "Who the hell are you to pretend to be him? Leave, or I'll kill you right now!"

Richard looked at the soldier, suddenly speaking up, “I recognize you! You’re Charles.”

The soldier was shocked. He had seen Richard when the boy had first stepped foot on the island. At that time, Richard had strolled around as Gaton picked out a few soldiers to showcase them as good examples of the qualities of a rune knight. He remembered that Gaton had only mentioned his name in passing, never expecting that Richard would actually remember it.

However, his expression still changed as he said icily, “Don’t try to be friendly with me! You’re not allowed to leave anymore, just stay here! Someone will come over to interrogate you soon.”

“Interrogate me?” Richard smiled coldly, drawing his blade. The amber moon appeared atop his head, everything around him lighting up with sword lights.

Charles’s head flew off his body into the sky, a look of horror still etched on his face. He would never have thought that Richard would kill him in such an abrupt fashion. This was the floating island, a place where the branch families had an absolute advantage. How would Richard dare to kill him?

It was only in the moment before his death that the man suddenly remembered how cruel and heartless Gaton was towards his enemies. The moment Richard brandished his sword, he saw an image of the Marquess in him.

## Book 3, Chapter 34 - Halted

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Fresh blood spurted out of Charles's headless body like it was a fountain, splashing on the faces of everyone nearby.

The amber light faded from the dagger as Richard put it back in its sheath, taking large strides towards the castle past the dumbstruck crowd.

It took everyone some time to recover from the shock, realising that there were two arms on the ground as well! Two mournful shrieks rang out as those that had reached for their weapons realised their arms had been chopped off by Richard.

The two paladins exchanged looks, following Richard to the castle.

The chaos and the bloodcurdling screams caused by the portal area alarmed the entire island. Batches of soldiers brandished their swords and charged towards the gate, a few nimble silhouettes even overtaking the average soldiers and knights to appear in front of Richard in the blink of an eye. Hundreds of warriors were stood before Richard in no time, their swords pointing straight at him!

If one had a bird's eye view of the situation, they would see three tiny dots in the empty space around the portal opposed by a black mass of enemies, surrounded in an arc. Two powers that were nowhere close to each other were in the midst of a confrontation.

Doubt, fear, resentment, malice, and hesitation. Richard could read the expressions of everyone, whether they looked familiar or were complete strangers. The whispers were getting louder.

“It's Richard!”

“The young master is back, what should we do?”

Despite hundreds of people watching him attentively, Richard still remained calm. He didn't even unsheathe his blade, icy glare sweeping across the enemies in front as a calm, cold voice

resonated through the area, “Do you want me to exterminate your entire families?”

The brief sentence was like a block of ice thrown into a fryer, causing the crowd to erupt in a flurry of noises. The chaos over the past few days, the successful looting, and the enticement of some conniving figures and wealthy families had caused all of them to completely forget their identity and status. These slightly troubling yet peaceful days made many assume they were the real owners of this island and its wealth!

It was only now, with Richard in front of them, that they considered the consequences.

The Archerons were never lenient with traitors. In fact, every noble family in Norland had records of shedding blood to suppress rebellious branches. The extermination of entire families was only inevitable, but the process could be as long and painful as one wanted it to be.

“This guy is trying to pass off as Young Master Richard!” someone suddenly shouted from the crowd, “K-Kill him!” If his voice wasn’t so hoarse, if his words didn’t break at the end, perhaps he would have been a little persuasive.

Without waiting for the imminent uproar, a tall lady suddenly appeared in front of Richard. “Shut up!” she shouted furiously, her voice loud and clear like dragon’s roar or phoenix cry. Almost everyone was left with their heads buzzing, their minds instantly blanking out.

Done shouting, the lady took two steps towards Richard and fell to one knee, “I am Fuschia, Earl Alice’s right hand. It is my humble pleasure to meet you, Young Master Richard.”

Fuschia’s behaviour startled Richard slightly. This was extremely formal etiquette; even if she wanted to express her goodwill, she was still a servant of Alice and didn’t have to behave like an underling with him.

On the other end, Baron Sua's expression darkened significantly, his features seemingly shrouded in the ashen haze of Floe Bay's sky. Earl Goliath's representative was indifferent as usual, only observing and recording the incident with no intent to participate.

The crowd was slowly becoming restless. Countless pairs of eyes swept across these three representatives. All three had acted completely differently, leaving them on tenterhooks.

Richard furrowed his brows and went forward to help Fuschia up, "You shouldn't salute me like this, should you?"

"My Lady ordered that I was to become your subordinate when you return. I will listen to your instructions until she commands otherwise."

"Alice..." Richard muttered, unable to figure out the intentions of his generation's goddess of war.

Fuschia was an unexpected assistant, and a formidable one at that. A quick detection spell indicated she was level 19, armed with six runes from head to toe. Although half those runes were only elementary, she still had astonishing might.

However, Richard wasn't in a confrontation with hundreds of people from the branch families just because he was dauntless. He had some tricks hidden up his sleeve, one of them the presence of the two paladins behind him.

Baron Sua spoke up leisurely, "Young Master Richard. You killed a few people the moment you returned, and you're about to exterminate the hundreds of Archerons here. Truly impressive!"

Richard's gaze finally landed on the man. "Who the hell are you?" he asked coldly.

Sua's expression changed instantly. The guards behind him grew indignant at Richard's rudeness, a few already reaching for the swords at their waists.

Richard's gaze immediately fell on the hands that were on the

hilts, his gaze freezing over. Baron Sua suddenly felt a chill run down his spine, promptly raising his hand to stop his subordinates from making any further moves.

Richard narrowed his eyes and said insipidly, “Very timely. If anyone dared to pull their sword out, I would have chopped them to pieces and fed them to the wyverns.”

Baron Sua froze and replied coldly, “Richard, you’re being far too savage! This place is—”

“Marquess Gaton’s island,” Richard interrupted him.

Sua’s expression changed again. He snorted heavily, correcting Richard, “This is the Archeron island!”

Richard started to raise his voice as well, “This island belongs to Marquess Gaton Archeron. The island, and everything on it, has nothing to do with anyone not of his blood.”

This declaration immediately set off intense protests.

Richard laughed coldly, “If any of you object, you can appeal to the royal family or the Church. Go, right away!”

The clamour instantly quieted down.

Appealing to the royal family or the Church of the Eternal Dragon? Nobody in their right mind would do that. Alas, the actions of these branch families couldn’t be made public. If not for their powerful backers being considerate enough to keep the information under wraps, it would have created a ruckus long ago.

“We can’t let him take what’s ours!” someone yelled out from the crowd. At the thought of the immense fortune they already possessed, the fortune they were yet to attain, the mob grew furious as they gripped their swords and closed in. A single spark would send everything into chaos!

## Book 3, Chapter 35 - Halted

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All the true Archerons, the vicious soldiers who had trained silently on this island ever since Gaton went missing, finally made their appearance. They cut through the chaotic crowd and headed towards Richard, turning around to form a protective barrier in front of the young mage.

They clenched their weapons tightly, silent gazes trained on the monkeys in front. A powerful aura gradually enveloped the opponents, as imposing as a mountain. Although they were greatly outnumbered, nobody doubted their courage to unsheathe their swords!

Richard's heart started to pulse violently. His Archeron bloodline started to burn bright, just another step from the mob and he would activate Blaze to burn them down without hesitation. His barrage of fireballs would turn this ugly arc of ruffians into ash!

Restricted as they were by the terrain, the thugs were gathered close together. He was confident that a bombardment of ten fireballs would leave the number of people remaining in the single digits. No matter how badly he would be wounded in the process, he would stand his ground!

It was at that moment that the paladins unsheathed their swords and stepped forward, bellowing in a deep voice, "We are paladins of the Eternal Dragon! Any attack on Sir Richard will be considered a transgression against the Church! Not even your families will be spared!"

The declaration caused everyone to gasp in shock. A transgression against the Church of the Eternal Dragon? The consequences of such a thing were worse than attacking the Sacred Alliance itself!

Sua's expression changed drastically as well. "Impossible!" he cried out, "This is a dispute between secular nobles. How can the



Church intervene? Who made this decision?”

One of the paladins turned towards him, “You are...”

Sua stuck out his chest, proclaiming loudly, “I am Baron Sua Archeron, son of Sauron Archeron! I need to know who made this decision.”

However, the paladin’s face filled with derision as he laughed coldly, “A mere second-rate noble. What right do you have to doubt Lord Ferdinand’s decisions?”

Sua was visibly upset, arguing, “But my father is—”

“The decision was taken by Marquess Ferdinand!” the paladin interrupted impatiently, “Who do you think you are? Just a baron from the country that nobody has ever heard of, you don’t even have much status!”

Sua’s face swelled up, so red it seemed to be glistening with blood. However, he said nothing. The true nobles of the Sacred Alliance really didn’t think someone like him qualified to enter Faust. Regardless of how young and impulsive he was, he knew the consequences of offending the Church of the Eternal Dragon. The priestesses wouldn’t even have to lift a finger, a single word would leave many nobles hanging over them to annihilate him on their behalf.

It was just that interventions by the Church of the Eternal Dragon were unheard of in the longest time. The Church hardly participated even in wars between the empires. What was going on today?

Richard was already prepared for battle, but he saw his enemies retreat one by one at the paladins’ words. Even though he had expected it, he still felt unable to vent the fury that overwhelmed his heart.

His gaze landed on Sua once more. The moment the man had introduced himself, Richard keenly sensed that the fellow

definitely had a part to play in the island's current situation.

“Baron Sua.”

“What?” Sua turned and glowered at Richard. Having been belittled by the paladins, this form of address seemed exceptionally sarcastic.

“Get lost,” Richard said calmly, “Leave this island at once.”

“Why?!” Sua squeezed out from gritted teeth. His handsome face was already distorted by his wrath; the more nonchalant Richard was, the more humiliated he felt.

Richard looked into his eyes, saying indifferently, “It's fine if you don't leave, just be ready to bear the responsibility. All the consequences will be on your head, now and in the future. Are you sure you want to stay?”

Sua's eyes were ablaze as his glare met Richard's gaze, but all he could see was a bottomless sea. It was completely tranquil, without a single ripple.

The two looked at each other face to face for a full ten minutes before Sua snorted, gloomily calling his guards to leave. They were stunned, but all they could do was to follow.

He lowered his voice when he brushed past Richard, saying fiercely, “We still have many days ahead!”

“Send my greetings to Uncle Sauron,” Richard replied indifferently.

Sua felt a chill down his spine. He took large strides towards the portal, not saying another word.

“My Lord, why didn't you just slaughter that Richard guy?” a young, fierce-looking guard asked on the other side, “The Church's rules don't allow it to meddle with the affairs of the nobles.”

Already boiling with rage, Sua couldn't hold himself back any longer. Thump! a resounding slap rang out!

The young guard felt his head spinning, blood spurting into his mouth. He watched as his lord left, feeling wronged and puzzled.

Another guard, this one in the later parts of his life, sighed. “Oh, you fool,” he said in a low voice, “Do you think Richard is the same as Gaton’s other children? Killing them is no big issue, but if you really want to mess with Richard you can’t do it in such a situation. Even if the Church doesn’t intervene, do you now know who his teacher is? It’s fine if we were reasonable, but in this scenario... The moment you harm Richard in public, Her Excellency Sharon won’t take things lying down. Did you forget the millions of dead grey dwarves?”

The young bodyguard was finally enlightened. “So you’re saying that we need to find a reasonable opportunity to make our move? Or at least a situation with no witnesses so Her Excellency won’t have an excuse to attack us?”

“Of course! If Her Excellency takes action, forget the Lord, even Marquess Sauron himself will find it hard to escape!”

The young bodyguard nodded repeatedly, his ferocity fading away.

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Richard didn’t take the little episode outside the castle to heart. He turned towards the branch family members who didn’t know what to do, “As for all of you, stay if you wish to. You can leave anytime you want.”

That said, he headed towards the castle. Those who had originally stood in his way hurriedly moved aside to clear the path. Even Baron Sua had retreated, and their strength and background could not compare. The only advantage they held over Sua was numbers.

But numbers were never the deciding factor in a world where two people could have such a vast difference in power.

The monkeys from the branch families could already feel a sense

of foreboding, but it was an impossible task to rid oneself of greed. They were reluctant to leave— after all, Richard was just too young, and his level wasn't all that high either. In other words, the only thing that could convince them to leave was his status.

When he entered the family castle, Richard felt that the atmosphere was strange. People kept running out of the halls, their faces completely foreign to him. They brushed past him without pause, hurrying away.

Richard's face was as solemn as still water. He didn't obstruct or interrogate them, instead silently watching as he committed every single face to memory.

## Book 3, Chapter 36 - Subdue

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The first thing Richard did was to walk around the castle's basement, looking through every room before stopping at the warehouse. He slowly swept his eyes across everything.

He then walked to the second floor, but this time the quiet Archerons that had been protecting him all this while did not follow him. They instead scattered to every corner of the castle, taking up guard duty.

The small number of guards left behind by Gaton were now concentrated on the second floor and beyond. Still devoted to their lord, they were prepared to guard the most important parts of the castle to their deaths. He met the old steward in his room, finding the man bedridden and incapable of moving freely. A crisp sound of knuckles cracking rang out from his clenched hands.

Seeing Richard arrive, the old man forced his injured body up. "Young Master Richard!" he shouted, his entire body trembling, "You're back!"

Richard walked to the bedside and said softly, "I'm back, safe and sound. I've also built a base on another plane."

The steward nodded forcefully, "Master always thought about you before he left. We never expected... You don't need to worry, Master was only hit by a small trap. He will definitely return."

Richard patted the old man's hand gently, "I know he won't die. Rest well... I'll take care of everything here."

The steward suddenly thought of something and took off his necklace, revealing a golden key tied to the tip. He passed the key onto Richard, "Master left you something on the highest floor of the castle. Her Highness Mountainsea sent a present as well, which is placed in his private room. This is the key; it needs to be soaked in your blood before it is used, or it will trigger an extremely

powerful lightning trap that would kill even a saint. I feared those people would rush into the restricted areas, so I sealed it off after putting the gift from Her Highness Mountainsea inside.”

Richard took the key, leaving the room to continue looking through the castle. He took a deep breath after gently closing the door, releasing a hint of sulphur into the air.

On the third floor, he saw his own siblings. Wennington and Venica were pretty good blaze guardians, while Demi was already a level 11 cursemaster only slightly weaker than himself. However, the latter looked very weak, her collar pulled up.

Richard frowned, reaching out to pull down her collar until almost the entirety of her breasts was exposed. On her collarbone was a ghastly patch of a bruise.

Richard’s pupils narrowed and he asked dully, “They violated you?”

“No! It’s not what you think. It’s just...” Demi somewhat avoided Richard’s eye before finally sighing and said helplessly, “Alright, I was too careless at the time. They snuck a hit on me and I was beaten heavily. The bruise on my shoulder was from the fall, only a scratch. It’s very embarrassing, but...”

“Where were you hit?”

She helplessly pointed to her abdomen.

Richard gently traced his hands over her abdomen. Although she didn’t make any sound, her eyebrows clearly furrowed for a moment.

He didn’t say anything, quietly leaving her room to continue upstairs. The fourth floor was Gaton’s exclusive work area, with the core servants and his followers normally entering the place from a separate staircase.

Having followed behind Richard all this while, Fuschia stopped and shrugged her shoulders, “I shouldn’t be going upstairs, I’ll

wait for you here.”

Richard nodded, “Alright. I’ll come down and look for you after a while. I think there are many topics we need to discuss with regards to the Earl.”

The work area combined Gaton’s study, his office, and command centre. Similar to before, Richard looked through everything before making his way up. However, at the end of the staircase was a locked door.

Richard slid the key across his wrist, tainting the gold with a spurt of blood. The key seemed to absorb all it could get for a few moments, beginning to emit a crimson radiance. He then put it in the keyhole, opening the door with a slight twist. The lock clicked open, the door silently opening inwards.

The first thing he saw inside was the skeletal remains of the ancient beast. He also saw the astral beast head that was wrapped in many layers of cloth. A single glance told him that they would both serve as great offerings; the exposed remains were emitting an aura of aeons, while whatever was wrapped within the cloth gave him an intense feeling of danger. If sent to the Church of the Eternal Dragon, it would be amongst the highest level of offerings.

Richard came to a decision in no time. He would hold a ceremony with these two items before he left for Faelor; they were the most valuable things in the castle, and he felt like he had to convert as much of his wealth as possible into ready power. Only during sacrifices would offerings reflect their true value.

He walked to the huge, dusty package and recognised the texture of magic cloth. He wasn’t in a hurry to undo the rather familiar knot, instead looking over it to find words in a familiar handwriting scrawled on the side with a magic pen. “Be careful” were the only words Sharon had left behind, but he still stared at them for a long time.

Lastly, he came to the Archeron cemetery. The mountain still

had a sunset sky, the smell of sulphur permeating everywhere even as the crater regularly spouted bursts of thick, smoking lava. The dark tombstones everywhere stood quietly, conveying the history of blood and fire.

He now knew that this was an independent space, only accessible to approved Archerons. Anybody without access would need to use pure strength to suppress and eliminate the owner's mark, making him the only one on the island able to enter the cemetery. He lifted his head, looking up at the volcano towards the uppermost level of the graveyard. He still remembered that his mother would eventually rest there.

And Gaton... If that man didn't die in some other plane, he would also be buried on that level one day.

Richard stood there quietly, trying to expel his father from his heart. He absolutely didn't want to think about anything concerning the man. In his heart, the Archeron cemetery originally didn't concern him at all.

Still, as his gaze swept past every corner of the graveyard, he decided to ensure that this place remained undisturbed by any bandits or enemies. It had nothing to do with the Archeron Family; he was just protecting his mother's final home.

At least that's how he convinced himself.

.....

The cemetery was the last part of the castle that Richard visited. He finally returned to Gaton's command centre, standing quietly in front of the large map of Norland. He remained there for an entire hour, his thoughts unknown.

It was only when the sun set that he finally moved. A pull of a rope sounded a bell that summoned two attendants, faces he had once seen beside Gaton and knew had served him for many years. There was no need to doubt their loyalty.



“What are your instructions, Young Master?” one of the old men asked. These attendants had droves of knowledge, and were individually decently strong as well. In fact, they were equivalent to the steward who handled Gaton’s daily affairs.

“There are five knights stationed in other planes right now?” Richard muttered.

“Yes, Young Master. Blood Paladin Senma, Berserker Ward...” the attendant quickly started to rattle off their names, but Richard interrupted him, “There’s no need for details, it doesn’t matter. Find a way to inform them to rush back to the island as fast as they can. I know every plane has a portal leading here, so if there aren’t any accidents I should be able to see them around this time tomorrow. All of them!”

The attendant agreed, but then followed up, “Young Master, they still need to guard their planes. It might not be convenient for them to come back...”

Richard interrupted the man again, “The situation here has already devolved this far and they still can’t come? Besides, they can still return later. Tell them that I’m taking over the family until Marquess Gaton returns. They have to come and see me! If they’re not here around this time tomorrow, whoever is absent doesn’t have to come back anymore. I’ll personally pay them a visit in the future!”

“This... It might not be a good idea. Perhaps after some time, say a year or two, it might be more appropriate,” the attendant said worriedly. He remained tactful while trying to point out that Richard perhaps wasn’t strong enough right now, that his wish to replace Gaton as the Archeron protector wasn’t mature yet. At the very least, it would be difficult to intimidate those generals under Gaton who originally wouldn’t bow their heads to anyone else.

Richard sensed his actual meaning, putting on a smile, “It’s alright, go and pass down the news. At least in smaller wars, I’m

not afraid of anyone.”

Advice given, the attendant had done his duty. He thus transmitted the news to Gaton’s four planes through the magic circles.

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The reactions of the five knights were each different from the other.

Blood Paladin Senma was lazily dozing off on a balcony, the bright and beautiful sunshine causing her eyelids to grow heavy. She swept through the message once when she received it, mumbling, “It’s that restless guy again, trying to make us declare our positions... Hmph, it should be for those even more restless fellows to see. So silly!”

She simply tossed the paper to one side, closing her eyes and continuing her sleep.

A gentle breeze brushed past, picking up the piece of paper and wanting to carry it far away. However, a beautiful and slender hand suddenly caught it and picked it up from the wind.

## Book 3, Chapter 37 - Subdue(2)

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Senma didn't know when she'd stood up. One hand stuffed the letter into her breastplate, the other covering her mouth as she yawned a few times. "No way. That guy always comes to create trouble," she said confidently, "I better go see him myself. But his luck isn't bad, there shouldn't be anything... Hmph, it's still better to take a look or I won't be able to relax. I wonder if he's gotten more handsome... I still took an arrow for him that time!"

In another plane. Berserker Ward, standing in a desolate desert, received the news as well. He scrunched up the piece of paper, ripping it to shreds with his large hands. "Bah! You can order me around when you have half of Lord Gaton's power, brat!"

Asiris and Cyrden took care of a plane's defence together. Their reactions to Richard's message were polar opposites.

"We have to go back," Asiris said slowly, quickly flipping through the Book of Darkness in his hands, "Lord Gaton once saved my life."

"If you really care for Lord Gaton, you should stand guard here instead of going to pay respects to a kid whose hair isn't even grown in!" Cyrden mocked. Two daggers were flashing in his hands, swimming between his fingers like fish. A sharp killing intent covered Asiris' weak spots.

"You want to betray Lord Gaton?" The Dark Priest's voice grew freezing cold.

"Of course not! I'll never betray Lord Gaton, but that doesn't mean I'll be loyal to his children!" Cyrden screamed.

Asiris remained silent for a moment before saying, "If that's the case, I'll go back myself."

"You're crazy!" Cyrden was enraged, "What point is there in going back? To show loyalty to that little thing? What happens to

this plane if you leave? Do you want me to take care of the demigod avatar from the other side alone? That fellow's nearly the same as a legendary being from Norland. You want Lord Gatton to come back here to see us beaten back until a single base remains? Who knows, even our advance base might be conquered!"

"It's only to take a look, I'll be back very soon if there's nothing going on. You just have to... hold on a bit."

"Damn it! The speed in this plane is five times that of Norland! How should I hold on if you're even slightly delayed? Take a good look down below, those are soldiers we trained with much difficulty. They're lives as well, tens of thousands of them!"

Asiris took a deep breath, "It's not like we don't know the situation on the island. You're just making excuses, I need to go back this time. If you feel like you cannot handle it alone, then... retreat."

"Alright then!" Cyrden said with a sneer, "I'll retreat! Let's just run away and give everything we worked half a year for back to the enemy!"

Asiris didn't respond, merely opening the Book of Darkness, A portal formed in front of him and he stepped in, not paying attention to Cyrden's curses at all.

Last of all was the plane that originally belonged to the Schumpeters. Dragon Mage Lina was resting in a hastily erected camp, the untidy tents littered with injured soldiers. Painful groans rang out everywhere, the stench of blood all over the place.

When the attendant delivered Richard's news, Lina was in the midst of picking at rotting flesh in her thigh with a silver knife. An arrow with a blue glow was stuck in the muscle.

One glance at the letter and she suddenly shouted out, "Ha! That guy is back?"

However, the agitated movements caused the knife to pluck out

the arrow in one shot, causing her to grimace in pain. Looking at the flesh that was pulled out, the Dragon Mage gritted her teeth in hatred. She quickly called for a cleric, putting her injured thigh in front of him.

The cleric was very old, his wrinkly face filled with the vicissitudes of time, but he was only level 8. He had no hope of ever surpassing level 10 in his life. The man's throat rolled violently at the sight of the plump, slender, pale thigh in front of him, his body bowing slightly to cover up certain changes down below. Not even his spacious robes could hide the difference.

“Healing spell! Hurry!” Lina shouted.

Only then did the man's dull gaze return to normal. He promptly shut his eyes, starting to chant a spell. And yet, a spell which should have been easy was failed twice in a row, wasting a lot of mana. The old man suddenly felt the breeze in his face growing colder, laced with the killing intent of the Dragon Mage. He suddenly broke out in cold sweat, finally able to concentrate and complete the spell.

The spell's radiance covered the thigh, a light green mist rising from the wound as it recovered colour. However, it evidently wasn't enough. The old cleric was about to prepare a second healing spell, but Lina interrupted him, “Save your power to heal the seriously wounded.”

“But... Lady Lina, your wound still needs at least two more spells...”

“Just go when I tell you to!” she replied angrily.

Once the old man grew flustered and escaped, the Dragon Mage heaved a sigh of relief. She took out a flask of healing medicine, pouring it on the wound on her thigh. Once the milky white liquid touched the injury, it immediately started to froth over while emitting a pungent smell. Lina knew the poisons that had infected her were being removed, but the entire process was so painful that

she turned a little pale.

Regardless of whether healing medicine was formed from a spell or through alchemy, it was always inferior to the spells of a cleric. It would often cause pain as well, the agony scaling with the effectiveness.

However, even if one wasn't still in the process of forming a foothold on a new plane, if expansion was smooth, an expedition could recruit few clerics. That incompetent lecher was one of the best Lina currently had. The few healing spells he could cast needed to be allocated to those soldiers who were seriously injured. If not for the fact that the medicine alone couldn't have contained her wound, she wouldn't even have asked for the one.

After treating the wound on her thigh, Lina stood up and looked dejectedly at a distant city. A large number of enemies were entrenched there, defending the place with three magic towers. It caused her to be somewhat worried as well.

## Book 3, Chapter 38 - Confidence

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Lina picked up the magic letter, looking over it carefully. She burst into a charming smile, saying to herself, “This fellow wants us to vow loyalty to him! Pfft, he dares to take over the terrible mess Lord Gaton left behind when he’s so young? He has courage, I’ll give him that, but what about ability... Oh alright, it just so happens that things aren’t going well for me here. I’ll go back just this once. Anyway, it’ll be to ask for help. Hehe!”

The Dragon Mage’s mind filled up with thoughts of Richard’s expression when his order for reinforcements was met with a request for help.

.....

Near sunset the next day, Asiris, Senma, and Lina met Richard in Gaton’s command centre. When they entered the room, Richard was standing in front of the huge magic table staring at the map of Norland, pondering over something.

They didn’t know whether it was intentional or not, but all three immediately noticed that he occupied the same position Gaton used to.

They ended up waiting for a few minutes until Richard lifted his head, his gaze sweeping past each of them, “Dark Priest Asiris, Blood Paladin Senma, Dragon Mage Lina...”

The knights each made a slight bow when their names were called out, a formal display of their stance. At least on the surface, they accepted him in Gaton’s position for now. However, the depth of their bows had meaning as well; nobody knew how long these three would actually comply.

“I was prepared for none of you to show up,” Richard said with a smile.

“You’re a handsome kid, I had to come back and look,” Senma

replied lazily.

“The air in Faust is good for the skin,” Lina followed up.

It was only Asiris— who seemingly never smiled— who said, “We still revere Lord Gatton.”

“That is true!” Richard laughed. He then took out three pieces of paper, handing them over to the knights. Asiris glanced through, finding a dense list of all sorts of objects that could be used as offerings. Combined, they were almost at the level of a greater offering.

“These were all originally stored in the castle’s warehouse, sent over by my Master. Not long ago, the Archeron branch families broke into the warehouse, injuring the steward and Demi before stealing them all.”

Senma put the list down, still languid, “It seems like most of those involved are still on the island—”

“No, they’re escaping!” Lina interrupted, “Don’t tell me they were intimidated by us...”

Through the long window in the command centre, they could already see a mess at the portal leading off the island. Many of the branch family members were rushing out with the intent to leave. Most had some luggage, but there were definitely no offerings on their persons. All the loot had been transported away the moment it was stolen; voluntarily or not, it would end up converging in the hands of the real big shots.

It was only after some time that many of them would realise that offerings were only resources for the rich and powerful. To weaklings like them, they only spelt disaster.

“Do I have to go kill all of them?” the Blood Paladin yawned, “Any later and they’ll all be gone.”

“It’s alright if some people escape,” Asiris replied indifferently, “Their families will be exterminated anyway. It’s only a little



inconvenient.”

“So now that we’re all here, can we start?” Senma asked.

However, none of them had expected Richard’s response. “No, let them escape,” he said dully, “I’ll naturally get them to return the offerings with interest in the future. Now isn’t the time for internal strife, our real enemies aren’t on this island.”

The three knights looked at each other, all somewhat surprised.

Richard pushed on the table in front of him with both hands, leaning forward to fix his gaze on the stubborn knights, “Most people—including you—think I’m very small and weak right now. I know you think I’m completely unworthy of Gaton’s position. The Archeron throne is built upon a volcanic crater; without the power to suppress the magma underground, one will be burnt to ashes by the flames. I admit I’m currently far from able to take this seat, but it cannot be left empty. The events on the island are proof aplenty that an empty throne would be a disaster for everyone.

“However, there will come a day when I have the power to hold this position; it might not even take that long! Still, I’ll return the throne to Gaton before I kick him off myself!”

Gaton was a rough, wild man; an erupting volcano. On the other hand, Richard had inherited many of his mother’s traits, appearing more handsome, exquisite, and reserved. They were complete opposites.

And yet, in that moment, this boy seemed to coincide with Gaton in the eyes of the three knights. Gaton too had made empty boasts in the past, but his hands ultimately gave birth to miracles. And right now, his son wanted to kick down their incomparably revered lord from his throne in the future!

It was an absurd claim, but they couldn’t bring themselves to laugh.

“Since you’re back, stay another two days; I’ll be holding a rune

convention of my own then. I don't hope for a vow of loyalty, only for you to have a little more confidence in me."

.....

Richard's return was a major piece of news that followed right after Gaton's disappearance. Although it didn't shock the entire Alliance like the Gaton incident had, it still alarmed at least half of Faust.

Island 7-2 was the centre of the shock, the chaos rippling out everywhere else. The people who tried to leave were one such ripple.

However, not everyone could just leave.

The teleportation gate flickered continuously, consuming magic crystals with no seeming end. These crystals naturally came from the Archeron warehouse, from Gaton's warehouse. It was another ultimate benefit that these children of the branches had taken for granted. They came through the portal and left through it, not realising that it needed money for its upkeep as well.

There was chaos outside the portal, with many people shoving each other to seize a better position. The gate could only allow a limited number of people through at once, and everyone wanted to leave as soon as they could. If not for the few demonic Archerons standing around the portal, these monkeys would likely start fighting to get to the front.

## Book 3, Chapter 39 - Glory

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Erwin was also in the midst of the crowd, squeezing forward as he slowly inched towards the portal. He tried his best to blend in, not appearing too cowardly. He absolutely couldn't allow anyone to recognise him.

He was scared once more. Ever since Richard's sudden return, he had never shut his eyes. When the mage had slashed Charles' head straight off, he hadn't been too far away. He had seen everything with his own eyes!

Still, he hadn't left immediately. Instinct told him that a conspiracy was afoot: Richard had made a public return and heartlessly forced Baron Sua off the land, why would he allow the troublemakers to leave peacefully? Perhaps there were swords and axes waiting for them on the other side.

Evidently, he wasn't the only one to feel this way. The other knights in training were the same, thinking it through and deciding that it was best to stay put and watch the developments. Richard's return was definitely something which did not please many powerful people, and these powerful people had abstained from attacking the island purely because Gaton hadn't been away for a long enough time. Now that his son was back, it was enough reason for them to take immediate action.

Things would change in two days, he'd reassured himself.

And yet, the powerful people he had waited for never came. Instead, he was met with the return of three of Gaton's knights!

With the three knights overseeing the floating island, any powerful family would think twice before taking any action. As such, Erwin decided to leave immediately. He had been the backbone of the riots, so it would be impossible to fool anyone. He had stooped low for the sake of vengeance and profit, and now it was time to pay.

The youth did not understand Richard, did not understand Richard's thinking. He wouldn't even think of the idea that Richard didn't intend to rely on the three knights to deal with people like him.

However, he was right about one thing. Richard truly wouldn't let him off so easily.

When the five people right in front of him disappeared into the portal, Erwin heaved a sigh of relief. But then, a longsword was suddenly stretched in front of him to block the path!

"Why did you block me?" Erwin asked, his face filled with traces of fear.

Only one step away from the portal, he couldn't help but think of forcing his way through. However, the person blocking his path was a middle-aged Archeron with a distinct murderous aura. The man had evidently experienced countless battles in his life. Erwin was certain that such a man could toy with him even from a two-level disadvantage, so he acted sensible enough to not step out of line.

"Why?" the man's expressionless face was suddenly flooded with unbridled contempt, "We have orders! All the footsoldiers and Archeron fighters are to remain on the island!" The Archeron fighters were the defenders of the family bloodline. In the man's eyes, the few soldiers in front of him were as worthless as broken metal. He felt ashamed to even grant them that title.

"Orders from whom?" Erwin asked angrily, "What right do they have to stop us from leaving?"

"From me!" a cold voice rang out from beside the footsoldiers, sending a chill down their spines.

Fuschia. A woman so powerful that no number of fighters could overthrow her.

Fuschia's eyes flashed with ridicule, "As for why, do you really

need me to explain? Did you really think the family's rules are just for show, that you can do as you please just because you have numbers? If any of you dares to step into the portal, you will be punished as a deserter!"

In all the various countries of the continent, across the various races, there was one punishment for all deserters: beheading!

"You're not a subordinate of Marquess Gaton, what right do you have to punish us?" a rough-looking warrior shouted out. He pushed the guard blocking him aside, making a dash for the portal.

However, an orange light flashed in front of him and his vision darkened. Erwin personally saw the warrior's body being cut in half. The severed body actually took two more steps before the two parts completely separated, the upper half falling into the portal. The portal flashed, teleporting it away.

"Tch, another waste of magic crystals," Fuschia said nonchalantly. Nobody knew how she had done it, but she was definitely the person who had killed the man! Now, nobody dared to question her authority.

Two soldiers were still trying to sneak out with the rest of the crowd, but they were fished out and executed immediately. Once that was done, nobody else tried anything funny.

The branch family members slowly left the floating island. While all the soldiers were held back, nobody told them what to do. Their movements weren't restricted either, aside from the portal area becoming taboo. However, the less news there was the more fearful they grew. If Richard didn't want anything to do with them, he wouldn't have had them blocked.

It was another sleepless night for Erwin. He didn't know what his fate would be the next day, the powerful people who had promised to protect him suddenly silent. All he could think of was the offerings that should have reached his family, wondering what kind of changes it would bring to them that would allow him to

grow himself. He had originally planned to use the offering for his own gain, but now it looked like that chance would be lost forever.

The youth still didn't know whether he was lucky or unfortunate. The offering he had risked his very life to snatch couldn't even activate the least of offerings. He only thought it would change his destiny.

.....

The island was very quiet the next day. Many people had disappeared, the three knights amongst them. The soldiers who had taken part in the riots were all anxious, not knowing that Richard was holding a rune convention where he would become an official runemaster.

The city of Faust was bustling as usual. The biggest news of the day was naturally the two rune conventions that would be held at the same time. Lunor's had been booked more than a month ago, and he was the royal runemaster of the Sacred Alliance whose runes were edging towards grade 4. His convention naturally generated a lot of excitement: it was obvious that there had been new developments. An announcement of grade 4 runes would be bad news to any country outside the Sacred Alliance.

## Book 3, Chapter 40 - Glory(2)

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Many people had worked tirelessly to come here from all over the country. There were even some from the Sacred Tree Empire and Millennial Empire; the long journey meant they had to take a laborious route with several flying beasts. Even the countries hostile to the Sacred Alliance had sent their agents. Second-hand information was not nearly as reliable as having an actual pair of eyes on the event.

As far as the large empires were concerned, a growing number of normal runemasters meant an ever-increasing army of rune knights. Furthermore, any breakthrough on the part of the royal runemaster would strengthen the powerhouses of the Alliance greatly. This meant there was a lot of interest in Lunor's rune convention, with even non-humans trying their luck to obtain information on the convention.

The convention was held in Faust's largest public temple, and the royal runemaster had booked an entire hall. The Temple of Glory was as old as Faust itself, having existed in the city when it was first discovered. The temple had played host to numerous large-scale events in history, from musical performances to rune conventions. Over time, it had become a customary location for all rune conventions.

On top of the official convention, Lunor's proudest student was announcing a rune of his own. Although it seemed like Foster only had an ordinary grade 2 rune to show, it still signified the addition of a new runemaster to the Sacred Alliance. This would greatly increase their strategic might.

Still, not many people were interested in him. Most were here solely to see Lunor, knowing that the Sacred Alliance was the youngest of the three human empires and had a shallow foundation. Runecrafting in the Alliance was not as advanced as the others, but a grade 4 rune from Norland would make up for a

major portion of the difference. Besides, Lunor breaking through would also increase the skills of his students.

And yet, a mere day before the convention, an explosive piece of news resounded throughout the Alliance. Richard Archeron would be holding a rune convention on the same day!

In any other situation, this would just be a new runemaster introducing themselves to the public eye. Not much could be gained from such a convention. However, Richard's convention was surprisingly also to be held at the Temple of Glory. What's more, he had also booked himself a large hall directly facing Lunor's!

Those who were sharp quickly sensed the strangeness of it all. Their interest in Richard grew considerably, with information on him being shared everywhere. The topic most discussed was the evaluation that he was a future saint runemaster. Although it sounded ridiculous, it was something that had come straight from the mouth of a legendary mage, Her Excellency Sharon!

Of course, there were few people who understood just how valuable and trustworthy such an assessment from Her Excellency was.

Richard was completely unprepared for such a circumstance. It was only when Noelene personally handed him the details of the convention that he realised it was even at the same venue. However magnanimous Lunor was, he would likely take such an action to be an unacceptable direct challenge. And Lunor had never been known for his generosity.

Looking through the details over and over again, Richard raised his head and gazed directly into Noelene's eyes, "Priestess Noelene... You seem very keen to see me and Grandmaster Lunor on opposing ends, setting up a situation where mediation is not an option."

Noelene smiled, "Yes, but that isn't the complete truth. We made



these arrangements partly so that more people can view your runes. A small price like this should be worth becoming a royal runemaster, no?”

“A royal runemaster?” Richard had heard this many times.

“Mm. If you perform well with the convention, you can open the doors to a potential partnership with the royal family. If you manage to procure a contract with the Sacred Alliance, they will support you with a lot of precious materials. When you become an official royal runemaster, you will be granted unrestricted access to the royal warehouse.

“Besides, you can look at it from another angle. Regardless of where you were, being noticed by the royal family would automatically make you an enemy of Lunor. Since you’re going to be offending him anyway, why not rub salt in the wound?”

Having heard her words, Richard followed up with another question, “Am I right in saying you didn’t plan this?”

Noelene smiled, “Clever kid. The Church of the Eternal Dragon always takes a neutral stand... Hmm, of course, that’s outside of special circumstances; there are always exceptions. I’m only doing somebody a favour with this arrangement.”

“Who?” Richard asked.

“I can’t tell you, but you’ll know soon enough. The only information you need is that this won’t do you any harm. The person in question harbours no ill will towards you.”

Richard did not continue pursuing the matter, merely nodding and sending the esteemed priestess away.

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The Temple of Glory.

An hour before the conventions were to start, many people were already inside the halls. They were grouped around in several

cliques, pleasantries and discussions aplenty. Everyone was guessing at the relationship between Richard and Lunor.

The designs of the two halls were completely different. Lunor's convention was obviously more lavish, with a high stage that looked impressive. On the contrary, Richard's set-up looked simple. Unlike Lunor, he hadn't prepared snacks and wine for his guests.

Both conventions would officially start at ten in the morning.

The bulk of the crowd was naturally at Lunor's convention. An established runemaster's wares were always more attractive than those of someone who had just advanced. As much as Richard was a future saint runemaster, that meant nothing in the now.

If a power sent a delegation, the primary decision maker was at Lunor's hall while an assistant or follower was sent over to see the events in Richard's convention.

When Lunor walked up his high stage to overlook the many people below, he didn't feel particularly happy. Richard's arrival had severely dampened his spirits. He cleared his voice and started speaking, "Ladies and gentlemen. I am pleased to have you all here today to witness the unveiling of my new rune. As everyone knows, runes are the crown jewel of magic. If you wish to delve deeper into the world of runes, you need to spend many arduous and isolated years exploring it. There are no genius runemasters..."

## Book 3, Chapter 41 - Glory(3)

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The two side halls were separated by a large corridor. If everything was a little quiet, Richard could even hear Lunor's voice. The runemaster was also a grand mage, using magic to amplify his voice. However, even as he began his attack on the 'so-called genius', Richard had already finished his brief opening speech and began to display the first rune: Elementary Strength.

Magnified holographic images of the rune popped up on both sides of the hall when it was unveiled. The images were rotating slowly, allowing those at the back to see them clearly as well.

Everyone below started discussing the rune immediately. This rune was just too ordinary, too common. Many grand mages who weren't even official runemasters could craft an elementary strength rune. Although the design of the rune in Richard's hand was slightly different from the standard, the effect was still the same. An elementary strength rune wouldn't be rare regardless of how fancy it was.

"Isn't this Elementary Strength? Is something wrong with my eyes?"

"No, you're not mistaken. This really is Elementary Strength."

"You have the cheek to show an elementary strength rune on such an occasion?!"

Despite the exclamations from the crowd, someone studied the rune for a bit and said profoundly, "The rune likely has an outstanding unique factor. I think it can be used as a hybrid rune, or it was supplemented with an attack augmenting attribute. Look, there's a brand new array in the bottom right."

Everyone was thus enlightened. A hybrid rune or one with an extra attribute truly would put this rune on par with most grade 2 runes, perhaps it could be even more precious. It would be logical

for Richard to release it here. But just as everyone was sighing, Richard began to introduce the abilities of the rune, “As you can see, this is Elementary Strength. It can increase the user’s strength by 39%...”

People grew more and more astonished as Richard continued his introduction. However, it still wasn’t because the rune was somehow magical. No, it was the exact opposite— this thing was just too ordinary!

The 39% amplification could be regarded as outstanding, nearly approaching a grade 2 strength rune while retaining a lower requirement, but this still wasn’t a hybrid rune.

However, that was all. Many people couldn’t believe that the introduction was complete when Richard put the rune down.

Richard attracted gazes once more with his second rune, but once again everyone was surprised to see an equally ordinary item in Elementary Defence! Of course, this one wasn’t exactly the same as the standard rune, with a few more patterns that weren’t a part of the regular design. Nobody understood exactly what this little formation was for, only able to make out that it was similar to the one in the strength rune.

Was this Richard’s personal style? This was the first thought that came to those with nimble minds. It was no secret that Gaton’s son had elven blood in him. It was in the elves’ nature to pursue perfection, and they were excessively fond of delicate and complicated art. Perhaps the formations were only a sort of decoration, a display of sorts just like an autograph on a famous painting.

But Richard’s runes were not famous paintings; in fact, they were far from any such thing.

Around the same time, Lunor finally completed his lengthy speech in the western hall and motioned for Foster to begin. The royal runemaster wasn’t famous for his speeches, his words

normally quite concise, but he had spoken passionately for a long time today. On the one hand, this expressed his pride in his breakthroughs, but on the other it might have been stimulated by Richard's appearance. He ended up talking about the difference between geniuses and liars for an extended length of time.

Although the audience hadn't grown impatient yet, they were signalling to each other with indistinct smiles.

Foster's followers told him about the two runes that Richard had just displayed, and the moment he ascended the stage someone immediately inquired about his opinion on them. He flashed what he thought to be the most charming of smiles, bright voice resonating throughout the hall under the influence of magic, "Although the rune structures are quite different from the standard version, attribute runes only depend on the extent of amplification and demand on capacity. No matter how the structure is changed, it is useless if these two indicators aren't improved. They're just a sensationalised gimmick.

"Talent isn't enough in the world of runes. One needs to be down to earth, climbing step by step to reach a higher level. Master Lunor already mentioned that there are no so-called geniuses in the craft. Too many have stopped at level 2, never making any more progress."

Having said all that, he took out his first rune. It was exquisitely made, the corners decorated with many gorgeous gems. The royal family crest was on the back of the slotting mechanism, with his full name signed on a corner of the rune. At the same time, a huge image appeared on the stage. The rune was magnified a few hundred times over so it could be viewed easily by everyone in the hall.

"Distinguished ladies and gentlemen. This is the first of two runes I will be releasing today, grade 2 Strength. Firstly, its amplification is as high as 43%! Based on this alone, the difference between grade 2 runes and elementary runes is obvious. No matter

how exquisitely a grade 1 rune is made, it is impossible for it to surpass a grade 2 rune. Even a 1% difference is a huge disparity...”

The crowd below mostly agreed with Foster’s remarks. The amplification was the primary indicator of a rune’s quality. A grade 2 rune could theoretically reach 50% amplification, but that would also greatly increase the capacity cost a few times over. Not many people in Norland could use an elementary rune to imitate a grade 2 rune like Richard could.

However, Richard himself wasn’t affected by this, his convention continuing as planned. The elementary defence rune he had just displayed was more remarkable than a standard one, but it still couldn’t compare to his previous works.

Several well-versed grand mages from amongst the audience frowned, beginning to ponder hard. Their sharp gazes had already allowed them to notice the impeccable precision of Richard’s two runes. The amplification should rightfully have been much higher, but... Could it be that the seemingly useless formations had some purpose?

When Richard took out his third rune, Vitality, the spirits of the audience were finally lifted a little.

Although one could tell that Vitality was a grade 1 rune from the structure and complexity, it was still a custom rune. The audience nodded in approval at Richard’s introduction; although the rune didn’t seem very powerful at first glance, those with true knowledge knew what it meant in the battlefield. Real wars often lasted a long time, and there were instances where one was left without reinforcements in a cruel environment. The advantages of a Vitality rune in such situations would begin to grow more obvious as time passed.

Given its practicality and the fact that Vitality was a custom rune that was rarely seen, one could barely grant Richard the title of a true runemaster. Not just any runemaster could design a custom

runes with unique characteristics. Take Foster's second rune for example, Agility. Although it was technically a custom design because the structure of the formation had been deliberately changed, it was still no different from a standard Agility rune. The structural alterations were purely for the sake of change, not serving any other purpose.

In fact, Foster's attack on Richard in the beginning was entirely applicable to himself. The only reason nobody spoke out about it was Lunor's presence.

When Foster took out his second rune in the western hall, the image of the grade 2 Agility rune replaced the grade 2 Strength. However, when Richard was introducing Vitality in the east, the images of the first two still remained. When he took out his fourth rune, Vitality was still floating in the air.

A fourth rune! Richard was actually unveiling a fourth rune! This made a lot of people gain a renewed interest in Richard; those who were initially a little disappointed also felt their spirits lifted.

A runemaster normally released around two or three runes in an ordinary convention. The more runes one released, the more they had mastered. This was an important criterion by which one would judge the runemaster's ability. Apart from the level of the rune, there were also differences between standard runes and custom designs.

In the western hall, Foster frowned as he looked at a piece of paper in his hand. His expression dimmed involuntarily—the release of four runes in a row indicated that Richard had likely mastered far more runes than him. His face started to heat up, the gazes from the audience below seemingly more glaring.

‘Damn it! This Richard might just be a threat... Why didn't you just die wherever you got lost?!’ Foster cursed in his heart.

Richard was calm and focused as he introduced the fourth rune, Guardian of Life. The eastern hall grew quiet as he went on, with

many people unable to help but hold their breath.

Guardian of Life had two abilities. First was an increase in the defence of the user, using their excess vitality as well as any lingering energy in the battlefield to power itself. The excess energy was also stored up, greatly reducing the requirement on carrying capacity on the rune knight. The second ability was to channel all the stored energy back to the user at will, turning into physical strength, vitality, or whatever other form of energy they needed. In combat, this rune had a combined effect of healing, increased strength, and boosted recovery.



## Book 3, Chapter 42 - Glory(4)

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Guardian of Life was an exceptionally powerful rune, a unique hybrid with multiple effects. A little bit of enhancement and it would be grade 3! Even in its current state, it surpassed many standard runes of that level!

The crowd had been holding their breaths all this while, but they couldn't do so anymore. Every breath of theirs grew increasingly rough, many beginning to think of tactics that could use Guardian of Life.

And yet, Richard didn't give them much time to think before he unveiled his fifth rune of the day.

There was another rune! Everyone below the stage was about to go mad. The third rune was Vitality, and the fourth was Guardian of Life. What could the fifth one be?

"Traverse the Wilderness. A custom grade 2 rune with average carrying requirements. It grants the user a small bonus to defence and movement speed. It also improves one's ability to pass through complicated terrain, and can be used on both rune knights and mounts..." Richard's voice was still as calm as ever.

The number of spectators in the eastern hall had already risen greatly. People were streaming in from the west ever since Richard had unveiled Vitality. Some of the nobles who didn't have any interest in weaker runes had already begun to dispatch their servants. Still, the crowd in the eastern hall was only a fifth of that in the western one. Lunor had yet to release his own new rune.

Traverse the Wilderness was a peculiar rune; its power wasn't very obvious on the surface. Still, just like the first four, the image still remained after Richard was done with it. This way, there were five holograms on each side.

Expectations began to rise. Many anticipated the sixth rune,

wondering what other surprises this young runemaster had in store.

However, a shout suddenly rang out in the hall.

“These five runes... Could they... Could they be...”

All the eyes immediately focused on the five runes. The image of a mounted knight formed in the hologram, the first four runes landing on his body and the fifth on his warhorse. However, this was just the start. Dazzling lines of magic began to appear one after the other, linking all five runes together!

At that very moment, Foster was expending all his strength and passion in the western hall. “Now, Grandmaster Lunor Leyfar will be revealing the pinnacle of his craft!” he shouted, “Runecrafting has become an art in my master’s hands!”

Lunor entered the stage amidst all the applause, looking down with a steady, arrogant smile. The crowd had been focused at the start, numerous gazes of anticipation centred on him, but now the numbers had somewhat reduced. Many were whispering to each other about something, evidently distracted. Even more annoying was the fact that many people were leaving the western hall as time passed, heading east!

Now was the crucial moment when he, Grandmaster Lunor of the Sacred Alliance, displayed his works! The royal runemaster almost lost control of his temper, wanting to shout in anger for those who weren’t concentrating to scram, but thankfully his rationality stopped him from being so foolish. Still, he was determined to use his newest work to give people a loud slap!

‘Nobody can underestimate a grand runemaster!’ he roared in his mind, ‘Richard was a joke in front of him!’

Taking a deep breath, Lunor gave up on the lengthy speech he had prepared and cut to the chase at two times the normal volume, “Everyone, I will now be showing the results of my research over

the past three years. This rune's power exceeds grade 3 in all aspects, only a step away from grade 4. Let me show you a worldly work of art! Its name is—"

"A SET!" a shriek from the crowd overpowered his voice, "Richard is announcing a set in the east hall!"

The crowd instantly went crazy!

"A set?!"

"How's that possible?"

"Quick, take a look! Damn it, is it really a set?"

A tide of people rushed over to the eastern hall, like moths heading for a flame. The western hall was deserted in an instant, Lunor's voice still echoing within, "Strike and Guard... The rune has two aspects..."

His mouth opened and closed a few times, but he did not make any sounds. Nobody could know the function of Strike and Guard — although the hologram on stage was projecting its image, no one was left to see.

Only a few dozens remained underneath the stage, all subordinates of Lunor and Foster. The royal runemaster felt his vision blank as he spat out a mouthful of blood, eyes rolling up before he collapsed backwards.

"Master... MASTER!" Foster was alarmed, quickly helping the man up. He was absolutely terrified at that moment, able to feel waves of cold enveloping him.

Lunor's fall was the fall of the glory that Foster had expected, of the huge amounts of wealth and privilege that would let him do as he pleased. From this moment on, even without the two of them, the Sacred Alliance would still have rune knights. Their assertions during the start of the convention had turned them into the laughing stock of Faust.

The eastern hall was already packed, but many people were still attempting to squeeze in. Many in Faust had gotten word of Richard's rune set, hastening over at full speed.

The virtual rune knight was slowly rotating on both sides of the stage, fusing with the five runes to finally show the purpose of those tiny formations. They were the key to connecting the runes! The clamour in the crowd instantly grew manifold, becoming so loud that there was a threat of the heavy roof being sent flying!

Numerous questions were directed at Richard, mostly concerning the capabilities of the rune set as well as its name. However, in the midst the thundering crowd, Richard would not be audible even at ten times the volume. He raised his hands and the noise quickly dropped; within a mere ten seconds, the booming sounds had faded away into deathly silence.

Richard did not speak immediately, instead surveying the entire hall. The platform he stood on was only a metre tall; with the many people of various races here, many were taller than him despite that difference. At this moment, however, practically everyone felt like Richard was looking down at them.

Indeed, looking down.

In that moment of absolute silence, all eyes, all attention, all the focus was on Richard and Richard alone.

In the past three centuries, only the dazzling saint runemaster Lugatti had announced a full rune set in his first convention. The Scarlet Knight series that he announced grew popular all over the continent!

It was only a few seconds of silence, but many people felt like an entire century had passed.

"This set is called Savage Barrier," Richard's voice finally rang out, "The set ability can form a defensive shield whose grade is based on the user's level. The shield can normally weather a full

power attack from an opponent three levels higher than the user.”

This meant a level 12 rune knight with Savage Barrier could take on the all-out attack of a level 15 knight without dying! This was basically another life on the battlefield. Although it wasn't the most startling of effects, it was very functional.

“This is... a set knight!” a hoarse voice suddenly shouted out.

Set knights were a special type of rune knight. These rune knights were designed around rune sets, and could be produced rather easily. A set like Savage Barrier with a mix of grade 1 and grade 2 runes was likely stronger than a rune knight with all grade 2 runes. Many were still immersed in the splendour of Richard declaring a set for his first convention, neglecting the production of rune knights that could follow.

Richard raised his arm once more, and the hall fell silent once more until only his voice could be heard. A wave of his rune caused a sixth rune to appear.

“This is Explosive Power. Outside of a fixed boost to strength, it can greatly increase one's strength when activated, similar to the Eruption ability... If you replace Guardian of Life with it in Savage Barrier, it turns into another set that I call Savage Strike. Both sets belong to the Savagery of Darkness series...”

As his voice was echoing through the large hall, nobody noticed a slender figure stood by the entrance. A hooded cloak covered all of her body, identity only revealed by an unwitting flash of amber eyes. Looking at Richard's words secure numerous hearts from up on the stage, a slight smile appeared on her face before she turned and silently left.

Flowsand had known about Richard's sets all along. The only reason she was here was to personally witness the moment... The moment when Richard officially entered the stage of the entire continent.

The hologram on Richard's left warped as he spoke, turning into the Savage Strike set. The moment he finished speaking, a middle-aged noble yelled from within the crowd, "Are these the first two sets of the Savagery of Darkness Series?"

"No, they're the second and third," Richard stated peacefully, "The first is called Breath of Darkness, but it isn't suitable for most knights."

This sent the crowd into an uproar once more. Nobody would have guessed that Richard had already created three different sets! And based on Richard's tone, Breath of Darkness was not a set to be mass produced, instead custom-made for someone with specific abilities. This was a higher standard of rune set that left all the powerhouses in the audience with drumming hearts! Breath of Darkness might not suit them, but its existence meant Richard could tailor make rune sets for their use as well!

The true big shots and powerful nobles saw the military significance of Savage Barrier and Savage Strike. The cost of production of the two sets that were a mix of grade 1 and grade 2 runes was at most two-thirds the cost of producing a full grade 2 rune knight, but their power far surpassed a regular grade 2 rune knight. Even if the runemaster collected fees for a full set of grade 2 runes, the set effects alone were worth it. There was no way to overstate its value. The only limit of these sets was the production speed.

Comments, evaluations, praise... All sorts of sounds rang out once more, causing the eastern hall to sound like an ocean. This moment in the Temple of Glory was fated to go down in history.

Richard was only seventeen this year, but he had already achieved glory.

## Book 3, Chapter 43 - Just Youth

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Richard's rune convention had made island 7-2 the focus of the entire Sacred Alliance once more. The event had barely come to an end before invitation cards were piling up on Richard's desks like snow. Powerful families with great status hoped for him to attend their private banquets, guaranteeing the presence of elders with power. Those with lesser status even hoped to visit him at his convenience.

The old steward was shocked by it all. He ignored his injuries and forced himself off his bed, personally going out to accept and arrange all the invitations and name cards. He brought along two literate attendants and had them record the appeals of each family, organising the invitations into separate categories to make it easy for Richard to go through them.

Most surprising was that the Wellinburg Family had an invitation in there as well!

This family had the highest status amongst those sending the invitations. Those with more power, like the royal family, would rather send representatives of sufficient status to contact Richard privately and extend an in-person invitation. It should have been the same with the Wellinburgs, but this invitation represented a change in their attitude. The family's silhouette had once been present amongst those who supported the Archérons' enemies from behind.

The old steward carefully placed this invitation right in the middle of Richard's desk, positioning it very neatly.

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Just as the convention ended, Richard had been worried about how he would leave the Temple of Glory. Fortunately, a group of royal guards squeezed into the eastern hall and solved his problem. At the helm was Prince Mordent, the representative of the entire

royal family and a mouthpiece for His Majesty Philip. The Prince announced that Richard was officially a royal runemaster from that day forth, and that he would report directly to the Emperor.

This news was shocking in a way, but in another it was not. It sounded unbelievable for a seventeen-year-old boy to become a royal runemaster, but one who could build rune sets definitely qualified for the position.

The guards escorted Richard out of the Temple of Glory, bringing him to a small and quiet building on the mountain behind Faust. Although this wasn't a floating island, it was still royal territory. Some of the lesser royals lived here, so people could not just come and go as they pleased.

A fine feast was prepared on the top floor of the building. When Richard walked into the room, he saw two people sitting on opposite ends of the table stand up to welcome him.

One of them was a handsome boy who looked to be under twenty, his eyes shining like morning stars. The initial impression he gave others was that he was very normal, without any aura of power, but Richard felt a faint pressure coming from him. His most eye-catching characteristic was that he looked so delicate and pretty that one couldn't tell his gender. If he changed into female clothing, he would look like a top-class beauty that surpassed even elves. In this regard, he beat even Richard himself.

Next to the boy was a tall young man who seemed 24 or 25. He was well-built but not too much so, his proportions flawless with his valiant aura exposed for everyone to see. Every muscle on his body seemed able to call forth a thunderous power at any time.

Richard felt a sting in his eye when gazing upon him, as if he was shot with a tiny amount of electricity. Most attention-grabbing were the faint patterns on the youth's exposed chest and forearms. Such numerous and complicated arrays, covering almost all of his body... If it wasn't a grade 4 rune, it had to be some kind of set.



“Welcome, Richard! I’m Nyris, the fourth son of that moody Emperor Philip. You can just call me Nyr.”

Richard bowed in respect, following the most stringent of noble etiquette, “It is an honour to meet you, Your Highness Nyris.”

The prince waved it off with a smile, “Don’t be so restrained. The thing I hate the most is all this complicated etiquette, it’s all just a waste of invaluable time! This fellow is always chiding me, saying wasting time is no different from wasting divine grace. To waste fifteen years is a waste of a Torrent of Life.”

Richard greatly sympathised with Nyris’ words; he wished he could put every second he was in Norland to use. Countless issues were waiting for him to deal with them, and every day he spent here was ten days passed in Faelor. He was losing divine grace!

Nyris pointed to the tall young man, “This guy is called Agamemnon. He’s amazing, normal people can’t beat him! He’s the youngest son of Grand Duke Ironblood.”

Agamemnon stretched out a hand, “Agamemnon.”

“Richard.”

The youth’s palm was neither soft nor hard, but it was incredibly warm with a constant aura of strength. Even with Precision, Richard could not confirm his level. This was extremely rare: ever since both of his blessings had reached grade 2, few amongst even Norland’s saints could hide their strength before him.

However, this handshake conveyed a lot of information. Agamemnon was confident, strong, and full of interest in him. There was also a hint of appreciation and friendliness.

But a shiver ran through Richard’s heart. This wasn’t because of Agamemnon himself, but the name of Ironblood. Grand Duke Ironblood was the ruler of island 5-5, adjacent to the royal family. And he had the power to match; forget the Sacred Alliance, he was a colossal figure across all of Norland.

Agamemnon stared at Richard for a while before flashing a smile that could hardly be seen, “I like you, Richard, but I don’t represent my family.”

This was only the first time they had met, and this fellow threw out such a direct declaration of his position. Richard, who was starting to grow familiar with the rules of the aristocracy, was left a little unsure of his answer. “This... I can understand.”

Nyris laughed, patting Richard’s shoulder with some force, “Alright, there’s no need to care about this guy. He doesn’t talk at all, sometimes you won’t hear more than a few sentences from him in an entire day. He’d probably compress an entire paragraph into a word if he could. Come, let’s eat before the dishes grow cold. Wasting time is wasting divine grace!”

Only Nyris, Agamemnon, and Richard were left in the room. All the attendants left, carefully closing the door.

It seemed that there would not be any more guests. Richard took a seat at the table and waited for Prince Nyris to explain the aim of this meeting. His intuition gave him a good feeling about the two young men— they were strong, straightforward, and sunny.

Of course, given their identities and status, there was no need for them to play dirty tricks. Most of the time, such ploys would not help grow their status.

Nyris started to sweep up the food on the table the moment he sat down, his manners so elegant that he even seemed a little graceful as he gobbled up the food at an unbelievable rate.

He ate and spoke at the same time, “Richard, I was the one who arranged the time and location of the convention. Father really wanted to see your talent and ability, and I felt this was the best method to force out as much of you as we could. As expected, you didn’t disappoint. To be exact, you actually exceeded everyone’s expectations. A lot of eyes in Faust are now focused on you, paying attention to the results of the convention.”

His voice was clear, crisp, and sweet. If one closed their eyes, they would only hear a smoothly flowing paragraph. However, Richard could not understand how the youth managed to speak with his mouth full of food. Nyris was eating fast and talking fast, both at the same time with neither disturbed by the other.

Seeing him still in a daze, Nyris called out to him, “Eat! Why aren't you eating? Food is the source of energy, you can only battle if you eat! That's the most accurate sentence dad has ever said. Aren't you from the Deepblue? Her Excellency Sharon is famous for being able to eat well, even my dad admires her very much.”

Richard didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He turned to look, and even the silent Agamemnon was buried in his food and eating hard. It seemed like these two had a common hobby. In fact, he himself had built up an appetite that didn't match his appearance in the Deepblue, it was just that he couldn't show it during a formal meeting. Seeing how quickly the two were sweeping through the food, this large table might possibly not be enough for all three of them.

“Nyris, isn't Lunor the royal great runemaster? Why is your arrangement... Let me be a little more direct... It seems like you want to use me to suppress him?” Richard had been influenced by the other two, throwing away any probes and hints that he would normally have opted for in the situation.

“Lunor? Hmph, he's just a borer, and an especially fat one at that!” Nyris huffed, a wry smile on his face, “We give him enough materials every year to create hundreds of powerful runes, but he gives us less than ten. That isn't even 10%, even a normal runemaster wouldn't have such a low success rate! His greed is endless. Every year he gets a huge sum of gold and resources from the family, but the number of runes he's giving us is actually dropping. If the number doesn't change, the quality will. Being greedy isn't much, but his greed is already affecting the ability of the powerhouses of our Alliance. This goes past our bottom line.”

Richard nodded, waiting for the next part.

Nyris continued, “So this was Father’s idea: as long as you could bring out a rather decent rune at the convention, we would immediately make an exception and have you become a royal runemaster. This would create pressure on Lunor and restrict him, and at the same time, we could use resources to train you instead of letting them fall into his pockets. This way, we might also have a saint runemaster in the future. Even if you no longer served as the royal runemaster, we would at least be friends.”

## Book 3, Chapter 44 - Just Youth(2)

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Richard could only smile helplessly, “But why did you have so much faith in me?”

“Because Her Excellency Sharon once said that you’re a future saint runemaster.”

“Master always exaggerates her words,” Richard said with a forced smile.

“No!” In a rare display of solemn earnestness, Agamemnon looked up from the pile of food.

“How could that even be possible?” Nyris shouted. What left Richard speechless was the fact that two pieces of roasted meat disappeared down his throat even as he did so, his eating not delayed in the slightest. “Very few people know this, but every comment from Her Excellency is a prediction. And anyone she has ever evaluated has ended up with achievements somewhere around what she said.”

“That can’t be...?” Now, it was Richard’s turn to be shocked. He had no idea that his teacher possessed such abilities. Her speaking style had always been rather... exaggerated, especially when it came to people she liked or disliked. If not for Sharon’s Delight, Richard would add in a ‘very’ to that statement. However, some serious consideration brought to mind the fact that Sharon had never decently evaluated anyone during the time he spent in the Deepblue except himself.

“It’s true,” Nyris followed up, “It’s said that the eyes of Her Excellency can pierce through the river of time and view images of the future. It’s the one thing about her that Father admires the most after the amount of food she can eat. It’s said that it has something to do with her race.”

“Race? She’s not human?” Richard was slightly shocked.

“Of course not!” What, you didn’t know? You’re the student she’s most proud of! But then again, it’s not that strange. Nobody knows her race— not even my dad.” Nyris said mysteriously. Of course, another honey-covered rib disappeared down his throat in the meanwhile, “But it’s said that it takes a few centuries for those of her race to grow into adults. Even dragons don’t need so long to grow! Oh... Hey Richard! We’re friends now, you definitely can’t tell Her Excellency that I said this!”

Richard was truly shocked this time.

Agamemnon suddenly looked up, “You’ve said too much!”

Nyris suddenly understood, hitting his own head in vexation, “Crap! I forgot that Her Excellency will know if her name is mentioned too many times! Enough of that... Richard, let’s discuss the matter with you being a royal runemaster!”

Richard was just about to accept when Agamemnon suddenly pushed a pile of roasted meatballs towards him, “Eat first. The food here is very expensive, and he eats too fast.”

These roasted meatballs looked ordinary, but upon tasting one Richard found it had a familiar taste. He had often eaten this sort of meat in the Deepblue. While the meatball was tiny, a fire surged out when it entered his stomach that slowly spread towards his limbs and bones.

“Red Dragon ribs! It’s not easy to find, I had to use an entire week’s allowance!” Nyris cried piteously. It had to be said that the youth was just too pretty, the fake wails left one feeling sympathy for him.

Richard felt bad and tried to push the plate to the middle of the table, but Agamemnon held his arm and explained, “Ignore him, he’s the best at acting pitiful!”

Left at a loss for what to do, Richard began to annihilate the meatballs on the plate. “So,” he asked as he ate, “What duties does

a royal runemaster have?”

“The first task is thirty sets each of Savage Barrier and Savage Strike!” Nyris didn’t hold back.

Richard was left unsure of whether to laugh or cry once more. Forget the rate of success, even if every single attempt succeeded that was still three hundred runes! How long would it take? Besides, he had only just officially become a runemaster. He had no real workshop, no proficient helpers nor apprentices.

Agamemnon frowned, “Be serious. We aren’t that close to Richard.”

Nyris shrugged and said, “Fine! Seeing as you helped us beat down Lunor, and let me appear good in front of Father, the royal family is willing to provide you access to any of the materials in our warehouse. All we need is one rune for every four sets of materials. If you’re building your rune sets, then there’s a bit more leeway. The second requirement is that the royal family needs to have first priority to buy your runes, at the same price as others of course. Also, outside of the materials, you will also get a million gold coins as compensation every year from the family.”

Richard had known that there were benefits of becoming a royal runemaster, but he had never assumed they would be so immense! Although powerful runes had a high failure rate, his own success rate was unimaginably high. It would be a huge source of profit.

“Alright then, can you sell the two sets you showed to us first?”

“It isn’t two sets,” Richard corrected, “It’s one set and a separate rune.”

“Six runes are fine. I want them all!”

It had been a very strange lunch. Richard felt something strange that he could not describe as he left the building. Was it that Nyris and Agamemnon were just too direct, so direct that they seemed genuine? They were different from all the other noble children he

had met before.

Agamemnon had patted his shoulder when they were about to part, saying, “Let’s take over planes together!” In that moment, he had been slightly touched.

The royal guards escorted Richard back to his island. When he walked out of the teleportation gate, his heart had turned cold and hard once more. He walked into Gaton’s study and sat in Gaton’s seat, beginning to skim through the documents piled high on the table.

Most of them were invitations, messages, or name cards, all in huge quantities. Even with his blessing of wisdom and the ability to think ten times as fast as a commoner, he still needed quite some time to look through everything earnestly. However, he was not planning to go to any of these banquets. He already held the title of royal runemaster now, and his results from the convention had surpassed expectations. Just like Nyris said, wasting time was wasting divine grace. What he needed most now was to raise his power and influence, not to go to banquets and meet noble ladies.

He planned to only stay in Norland for seven days.

However, he still had some things to deal with before he returned. He rang a bell to summon the old steward, “Invite the three knights and Miss Fuschia. Call Demi, Wennington, and Venica over as well. And get Erwin in here.”

The steward accepted the order and left. A moment later, everyone was present.

Of course, Erwin was ‘accompanied’ by two of Gaton’s personal guard.



## Book 3, Chapter 45 - Sentence

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The fifty paladins from the Church of the Eternal Dragon were already on the island. The situation was now stable, so the warriors from the branch families who were kept behind didn't dare to try and put up any new resistance. Their biggest backer in Baron Sua had been sent running with his tail between his legs, what could they do? Earl Goliath still had his representatives here, but as always they remained neutral and watched on silently.

When Erwin was brought into the study, Demi and Richard's other two siblings stood to his left while Fuschia was on the right. Richard was sitting peacefully, reading some information he had on hand. Erwin's face was white, but his expression showed that he was willing to throw caution to the wind and challenge him.

Richard only put down the papers after a few minutes, asking solemnly, "Erwin... Did Marquess Gaton do anything to let you down?"

"No."

"Did the Archeron Family do anything to let you down?"

"No."

Before Richard could even ask the third question, Erwin suddenly erupted, "I KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO ASK! There is no why... If you really want reasons, I should be the one asking the question! Why is it that all the wealth, status, power, and beautiful women are with you? Why do I have to work so hard for all of you, to kill in planar wars? Yes, you gave me training and equipment, but isn't that just because you want me to fight? How am I inferior to you nobles? If not for your daddy Gaton, what gives you the right to sit here?!"

Richard suddenly laughed and shook his head, pointing to his siblings, "Look. They're Gaton's children as well, but they can only

stand there while I take the seat... Forget it, you won't understand this... Or should I say you wouldn't admit it even if you understood? You're just someone who feels entitled to what others have, but you never stop to wonder whether what you want should belong to you. Alright now, let us look at this..."

Richard held up the documents and read through them line by line, "Sama, 49 years old, titled knight. Territory Wormwood Manor, 0.2 square kilometres with a population of 300. Wife Laney, 42, daughter of Sir Endor Archeron. A knight from a branch family, none in his line actually unlocked any bloodline abilities. Sir Sama has three children: Erwin, 22. Lisa, 17. Cindy, 16..."

"What are you doing?!" Erwin suddenly screamed, trying his best to rush towards Richard. However, the guards were well-prepared. They immediately sprang into action, punning him firmly to the ground. Erwin struggled with all his might, his eyes bloodshot as he yelled loudly, "If you touch a single hair from my family, I won't let you off for the rest of my life!"

Richard didn't feel anything at the sound of this threat, speaking nonchalantly, "It looks like you're quite concerned about your family. Still, do try to recall how Norland treats traitors who lead rebellions. Is the extermination of the family not the only way?"

"You dare!" Erwin had already used up all his energy, but he still tried to get up from the ground. One of the guards immediately stepped on his lower back, sending him back down. The stomp immediately knocked the wind out of him.

"They're just puny soldiers. Even if there's twice the number, why would I be afraid?" Richard said mockingly.

Erwin's anger immediately dissipated. "Richard," he said in a low voice, "Kill me and let my family go!"

"Do you think that's an option?" Richard's question caused the knight's face to turn white. He struggled on the floor, bestial noises escaping his throat. He knew that his sentencing would

follow.

Richard looked at the information sheet, “Destroying your family would be letting you off easy. Your parents are still very healthy, I’ll send them to the lowest levels of the mines to dig until they die. As for your sisters... Hmm, I have their portraits on hand, they’re rather pretty. Tch, it would be such a waste to kill them... I think I’ll turn them into slaves and sell them off to businessmen. What do you think? Oh, as far as the rest of your relatives are concerned, I’ll just save the hassle and kill them off.”

Screeching sounds rang out through gritted teeth as blood poured down the side of Erwin’s mouth. He was well aware of what would happen to his sisters if they became slaves, just as well as he was aware of the cruel and tough life in the lowest levels of a mine. The slaves placed there rarely if ever survived longer than a year. Richard’s punishment was far more cruel than the direct extermination of his bloodline.

“It looks like your masters from behind the scenes have no intentions to save you, Erwin. Well, I know you would be even crueller if you had managed to get your hands on Demi and the rest. I have always lived by the principle of giving back twice what I get; in this case, it’s only equal retaliation. You should feel lucky.

“Now then, is there anything else you would like to say?” Richard asked coldly.

Erwin struggled in his bonds, “I already sold the offerings, but I can give you whatever I got! Please spare my family, I will tell you who instigated me to do all this! They’re the true culprits that deserve death and punishment!”

Richard laughed, “That won’t be necessary. I know who they are, it isn’t exactly a secret. I have no plans to take them on as of yet, but at the same time, they cannot act against me. Are you disappointed that I can’t fight them in a battle to the death?

“As for the offerings... If I’m not wrong, you had no choice but to

sell your share to those masters. If you didn't, they would have slaughtered you like a dog. Alright, time is precious, the only reason I wasted so much time on you is that you're very malicious and unlikeable. I don't hate those who are instigating you, because those plots are normal even if they result in some casualties.

"You're different. Want to know why? Compared to invaders, accomplices and traitors are far more vicious." Richard stood up, picking up a dagger on his desk and pacing back and forth. His tone turned mild, "Don't worry, I won't kill you or your family. Death would be a quick escape and I'm not that generous. I will torment you forever, lock your soul in an eternal struggle."

Finished talking, Richard gestured to one of the guards. He opened the door of the study, pushing Coco in.

Coco let out a cry of alarm the moment she saw the situation in the study, covering her mouth as her face turned white. For his part, Erwin started to grow violent the moment he saw her, cursing furiously at Richard.

Richard turned towards him, "Every word of scolding from now will be a cut on one of your family. Trust me to remember this."

Erwin was taken aback. He stared venomously at Richard, but didn't dare to utter another vulgarity. However, it was evident that he was still cursing in his heart.

Richard then shifted his attention to Coco. The weak, delicate girl started trembling uncontrollably under his gaze, both arms jumping up to cover her body. She subconsciously tried to avoid his sight, tears long since flooding her eyes.

Richard sighed, "The founding emperor of the Sacred Alliance, Heavenly Emperor Charles, once said this: I can forgive mistakes, but I cannot accept betrayal. Take a look at this..."

Coco discovered that the paper Richard handed her contained details about her relatives and family members. She thought over

it for a while before realising what it meant. Her small face immediately turned pale, both hands starting to tremble as she stuttered out, “R-Richard... I... I didn’t betray you. It’s the truth! I still belong to you, you can... You can check...”

Richard lifted his head in surprise, “If you put it that way, you didn’t completely betray me. I had all the intent to give you a chance to prove yourself when I left. If you really had abided by the rules, you shouldn’t have met in private. I was planning to grant you your freedom based on your contribution and sincerity, but... Pity, you didn’t show me the qualities I wished to see. There are eyes and ears everywhere on this island, there’s no way to hide your actions.”

“So... sorry,” Coco said softly, her head lowered.

“Alright then, wasting time is wasting divine grace. It’s time we finished up.” Richard switched the topic, throwing the dagger in front of Erwin before saying icily, “We’ll talk about your punishment after this, but right now I’m sick of your relationship with Coco. If you want your family to live, cut off your filthy dick!”

Coco wanted to cry out in shock, but under Richard’s sharp gaze she had no choice but to swallow her words.

The guard who was stepping on Erwin loosened the pressure. The youth stood up, face pale, and picked up the short blade. “Will my family be free from harm?” he asked as he stared at Richard, “Can I live on?”

“Why would I let you off so easily? You will be charged for organising a rebellion, your family will be enslaved, but I will not make them mine workers or prostitutes. They will live out the tired and miserable lives of ordinary slaves, but as long as they do their jobs well they will survive. As for you, you will need to fight for me. You will lead be at the head of every charge, at the tail of every retreat, and at the front of the line for the most dangerous and difficult tasks. Satisfy me, and your family will have a more

comfortable life.”

Erwin nodded quietly, gritting his teeth and turning around to undress.

“Wait. Turn around and face everybody! And you, Coco, raise your head!”

Erwin’s hands trembled, as did the rest of his body. He had thought that he was vicious enough, but right now it felt hard to proceed. Two intentions were warring in his heart. The first was to run straight to Coco, killing this woman who had confused him with a single stab of the blade. She was even letting Richard inspect her! The other was to do as Richard instructed. At least that way, he would still live.

Eventually, the second thought won. The dagger fell down in one quick swoop!

## Book 3, Chapter 46 - Sentence(2)

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A miserable cry rang out as Erwin spat out blood. However, as shaky as his hands were, he didn't manage to finish the job in one go. He had no choice but to grit his teeth, cutting down a second and third time before a mass of flesh and blood fell off. Coco cried out and fell backwards, fainting.

The bloody scene left Wennington and Venica deathly pale, seemingly ready to vomit. Demi was much better, but her face still warped as well. Even Fuschia frowned, but she didn't say anything. Only Gaton's knights looked on calmly, as if they had merely seen a chicken being killed.

Richard waved his hands and had the guards take Coco and Erwin away, getting some people to clear up the blood in the study. Only then did he sit at his desk, picking up a second sheet of information he had prepared.

Fuschia couldn't hold herself back. "Why not just eliminate his family?" she asked, "Wouldn't that be much faster? You could just kill his family in front of his face. It would make him feel just as miserable."

Richard shook his head, "Family is only one of his weaknesses, but it isn't his biggest. People like him only care about themselves in the key moment. The only reason he accepted the sentence was for the sake of survival. If he truly did care for his family, he would never have betrayed Gaton. Even in the most chaotic moments of the riots, only a third of the soldiers from the branches actually took part in the rebellion."

Fuschia sighed, going silent.

Richard handed the sheet in his hands to the three knights. It was a list of names, the soldiers and knights who had participated in the rebellion. "These are considered the main offenders and need to be executed. The situation isn't stable right now, so you need to

do it cleanly without giving those watching a chance. I can only ask you three to do it.”

Asiris quickly browsed through the list, “56 people. Hmm, we need five minutes.”

“Alright, I’ll be waiting.”

The three knights pushed the door open and left. A moment later, a long, miserable cry echoed through the island. It was quickly followed by a second and a third, before the island devolved into a cacophony of screams. Some lasted a long time, like the first one, while others only lasted a second or two.

Close to dusk, the sunset glow bathed the sky over the island crimson. Murderous auras and hints of blood flashed all over the island, indistinctly merging with the evening clouds.

Blood finally washed away the chaos on the island.

.....

Even as things were set in motion on island 7-2, the Josephs’ island had a clear view of it all. Duke Joseph and Raymond were standing in front of a french window, one sitting and one standing as they gazed upon the volcano on the island. They felt like they were seeing pillars of bloody light soaring into the sky.

The old duke felt rather helpless, “Who would have thought that Richard would return soon after Gatton was gone? This little fellow is decisive and vicious, not much different from his father.”

The temperature in the room was pleasant. Raymond was sitting in a large armchair, but a thick blanket still covered him from his knees up. There wasn’t a trace of red in his face as he stared with rapt attention at the Archeron island, sighing, “Richard is far more difficult to deal with than I expected. Now that he’s a royal runemaster, there will be many families who want to enter into trade with him. I don’t know what methods he used, but the Church is also sheltering him openly... Even though it’s only for a



year, that's already long enough. Right now, we have no way to deal with him in Faust."

"But the internal strife will still hurt the Archeron Family greatly," Duke Joseph said slowly, "A fair amount of the offerings that streamed out of their island landed in our possession. We already have enough for three lesser sacrifices, and I'm preparing to use them all."

"What are you going to use the grace on?" Raymond asked.

The old man sighed deeply, "That... I'll use it on the family plane."

This signalled that he was giving up on contending with Richard using offerings. The wars in the future would grow long and tedious, filled with unpredictable changes.

A peculiar flush rose on Raymond's face and he sighed, "I really hope to battle him on another plane."

"There will be opportunities," the old Joseph said.

However, they both knew that the future was uncertain.

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Within the royal palace, Emperor Philip's evening tea was reaching its end. It would be time for supper in another half hour. The Emperor's time was scarce: breakfast, morning tea, lunch, evening tea, supper, dinner, snacks... these events crammed up his entire schedule, making many lament the tiresome event that was eating.

All sorts of foods filled the table that was a good five metres long, with Prince Nyris accompanying him for the meal. The Prince chatted with his father even as he ate, showing off his talent very thoroughly. However, the Emperor's stomach was like a bottomless pit; large pieces of food just disappeared down his throat.

Even at his fastest, Nyris was only a third of Philip's speed. If Richard was around, he would finally understand how the youth could eat without compromising on his ability to talk; it was just tempered in a terrible environment. Even so, Nyris couldn't compare to his father at all.

When one was eating with the Emperor, consuming too little would result in a scolding. This was especially true for the princes and princesses.

Philip looked outside the window, the Archeron island gently slipping past his vision. The volcano was far too eye-catching, making the island completely different from the rest.

"That kid already acted? He really is a little impatient!"

"He should be in a hurry to return to Faelor," Nyris responded, "There's a lot of easy divine grace there. Rumours are that the time-flow is one-tenth that of Norland."

"Too much of a hurry and he might miss out on some important things by his side," Philip said deeply.

Nyris pondered over the meaning of his father's words, but nothing came up. He still felt like the phrase 'wasting time is wasting divine grace' was far more meaningful.

Nyris then brought up the information about Richard's pay as a royal runemaster. When it came to Richard's agreement for one rune set for every five sets' worth of materials, he couldn't contain his excitement, "Hmph, Lunor's been getting more and more haughty in the past few years. Now that we have Richard, we don't need to pay more than the others to grow our rune knight legions. However, he seems to be on the losing end of this exchange... Father, do you not mean to nurture him as quickly as possible?"

"On the losing end?" Philip chuckled, swallowing a large piece of meat. Nyris frowned, thinking long and hard, but just couldn't understand what was wrong.

“I heard there was an armed rebellion in the Forest Plane the Archerons just took over,” the Emperor shifted the topic, “Richard will probably have to deal with it before returning to Faelor. If possible, go over with him and fight some battles to gain experience. Young people have to walk around the different planes.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Nyris always spoke formally when accepting orders.

“By the way, what kind of preparations did Richard make for his return to Faelor?”

Nyris rapidly shifted through the information in his mind, “He brought back some enchanted cloudiron that was worth a million coins. He gave it all to the Church as a substitute for divine grace. He also brought back six runes, and he agreed to give all of them to us. However, outside of a small number of precious magic materials he wanted his payment in quality magic equipment.”

Quality magic equipment generally meant something with two enchantments. Emperor Philip thought over the information he had just received, ‘Seems like Faelor has a lot of resources, but the magic culture is far behind ours. The kid is smart! He actually knows that the most fundamental use of a planar passage is trade and not war; that war is only a method of guaranteeing trade...’

The evening tea had come to an end. In another ten minutes, it would be time for dinner. Philip waved for Nyris to leave, “Make your preparations. Also, take Agamemnon with you, you three might become friends in the future.”

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On island 7-2, the knights went on a massacre at the speed of lightning. They completed the first mission from Richard in a mere four minutes, most of their time spent moving around instead of actually killing. The last minute was used just to check whether they had missed out on anyone.

While the island was being bathed in a rain of blood, Richard was still in the study, lightly kneading his forehead. He had a painful headache, a side effect of using his brain a little too much. Even with the support of Wisdom and Truth, it wasn't easy to find a clue in the midst of all this mystery. His mind had been working at full speed almost the entirety of the time since he had entered Norland, every seemingly easy decision backed by a lot of thought.

He was still young and inexperienced. Any important decision he took needed to be thought over repeatedly, considered from multiple angles. Only after thinking of everything he could would he make an official decision. Every word of his currently had extensive implications, able to affect the life and death of groups or involving millions. A wrong decision would take enormous amounts of effort to fix.

Despite having experienced planar war, it was only once he was seated on the throne that Richard found out how difficult things were for Gaton.

While waiting for the knights to return, he turned and asked Fuschia, "What does the Earl want?"

"What do you want to gain from the Earl?" Fuschia countered.

Richard frowned, slowly nodding, "It's true that I need her support right now. It's best if we can become close allies or something similar."

Fuschia was completely willing to answer the probe, "The Earl told me that she will reciprocate as long as one pays a sufficient price. Specifically, two rune knights for dinner, five for a kiss, seven to touch her breasts, ten to get her in bed, and twenty to become her partner. Don't think of using grade 1 rune knights to swindle her!"

Richard's mouth opened and closed, but he couldn't say a word.

Fuschia looked at him, "Right, you can get 30% off if it's set

knights. 60% if they're full grade 2. What do you think?"

This time it wasn't just Richard. Even Demi and the others were completely stupefied.

## Book 3, Chapter 47 - Test

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Richard huffed out a breath of turbid air, quickly getting his chaotic mind back on track. “Becoming partners is a pretty decent price for a steady alliance,” he said after some thought, “But I can’t afford so many rune knights right now.”

“You can consider it a loan,” Fuschia said, “You are a royal runemaster after all.”

“A loan?” Richard looked flabbergasted.

“Yes, you’ll have to repay her on a specific schedule.”

“What about the price for an alliance only?”

“There is no such option.”

He took in a deep breath, “Alright, deal! We’ll be partners.”

He was in desperate need of a strong ally right now. His status as a royal runemaster wasn’t an all-pass card, while the Church would only protect him for a year. Even the current conditions were only effective in Faust. He didn’t dare to leave the city at the moment.

As for their being partners seeming more a transaction than anything else, Richard didn’t believe that was completely the case. He still remembered that Gaton had once suggested this to him as well. It seemed like these so-called general terms were tailor-made for him, although they still squeezed quite a bit.

“A quarter of it for down payment. The agreement will only come into effect when my Lady receives it all,” Fuschia threw Richard off once again. “You have to be quick,” she added on, “You never know if there are others preparing their own rune knights.”

Richard was at a loss for how to answer, but fortunately the three knights chose that specific moment to return from their task.

“The corpses are piled up together, but we separated the heads.

Should we hang them up?” Asiris asked wretchedly.

Richard shook his head, “No need. Ship the corpses out of the island to be collected by their families. Also, inform all the branches that looted the offerings to return them within whatever deadline. If they don’t, the case will be dealt with like treason.”

“You want to reclaim the offerings?” Fuschia cut in, “I don’t think that’s possible. I heard that most of the offerings were forcefully bought off by powerful families once they were shipped off the island. Nearly nothing is left.”

Richard laughed, “I know. And Alice was one of the buyers, no?”

“Yes. We can get the offerings that were bought by the Earl, but a majority are untraceable. My Lady has less than a tenth of the total.”

“Forget it, she can have them. Treat it as a part of the down payment.”

Richard wasn’t expecting to reclaim the offerings at all, he was well aware that most had been resold. The only reason for doing this was the other families of Faust who meant ill; this way, they wouldn’t be able to openly support the traitors unless they were prepared to explain their interference in another family’s affairs to the Emperor and the assembly. Treason was not tolerated in any family. If one wished to support a rebellion in another family, they had to do it carefully in the dark.

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Once Richard was done settling the affairs of treason, Asiris stepped forward, “If I’m not needed for anything else, I have to head back. Cyrden won’t be able to last long.”

“I should head back too,” Senma said sleepily.

However, Lina didn’t speak up until the two knights were gone, “I... I cannot go back yet.”

She couldn't help but laugh at the expression that elicited from the runemaster. "I'm in charge of the Forest Plane," she clarified, "the one Master Gaton took from the Schumpeters. A huge rebellion occurred recently, and it will be tough for me to deal with it alone. I'll need some help."

Lina didn't mention what kind of help she needed, only looking at Richard with a smile. She seemed more interested in his reaction instead.

Richard thought things over for a moment before bringing her to the command centre. He then asked her to give him an idea of the topography and current situation.

The Dragon Mage had long since prepared for this. She inserted a memory crystal into a slot on the table, quickly bringing up a map of the Forest Plane. The map was quite limited, mostly made of mountain forests with a river flowing through. At the edge of the map was a city near which her troops were camped.

The Schumpeter crest was shining brightly on the city itself.

The Schumpeters had been working on the Forest Plane for a while, but they hadn't made much progress. All they managed was a single city-state, suffering many losses in their war against the aboriginals which greatly affected their rate of expansion.

Gaton had wiped out the Schumpeter armies when he arrived, taking control of the only city in the plane and leaving Lina behind to guard it. However, with him trapped in the Rosie Plane, the Schumpeters who had originally surrendered took the chance to rebel when Lina was off fighting the aboriginals. They quickly took full control of the city and were drawing on three magic towers to keep it in their hands. Lina had tried to attack them twice, but both battles had ended in her loss.

Richard stared at the map, pondering the situation. He understood this was a test by the Dragon Mage. If he failed, it would be difficult to have her follow his orders.



Lina still had about 2000 men remaining, giving her an upper hand over the rebels in both quantity and quality. The enemies only had a single saint, and he would never be able to defeat her in one-on-one combat. The difficulty lay in the three magic towers. Suppressed by them, the Dragon Mage was fighting at half her ability. In addition, the aboriginals of the plane were constantly harassing her army, making it hard for the soldiers to rest and recuperate. This was slowly eroding their morale.

The plane was named after its vast expanses of mountain forests, with few plains and grasslands. The aboriginals were an intelligent species similar to Norland's elves, quite swift in the woods with talent in archery and assassination. Even Lina herself had been shot once when she wasn't paying enough attention.

After getting details on the two battles from the Dragon Mage, Richard had a clear picture of the situation. The enemy saint had served to distract Lina each time, while the rebels massacred most of her men under the protection of their towers. She was left with no choice but to retreat every time.

"So, what's the plan?" Lina asked, "My troops can't be out there for too long. The daily casualties are a huge blow to their morale."

"How's the time-flow?" Richard raised his head.

"A third of Norland, the Schumpeters invested a lot into it."

He silently made some calculations, "I need some time to prepare. We'll head to the Forest Plane in two days, it should take me six to quell the rebellion."

"Six days?" Lina was too shocked for words, "In Norland time?"

"No, plane time."

## Book 3, Chapter 48 - Twins of Destiny

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Having sent the sceptical Dragon Mage away, Richard called over the old steward and quickly drafted a list of items for him to purchase as soon as possible. He then called a group of guards to move the ancient beast skeleton, heading towards the Church of the Eternal Dragon. He still owed them a lesser sacrifice, and it wasn't a good idea to be indebted to the Church.

In a quiet, secluded room in the rear of the church building, Flowsand and Ferlyn were seated opposite each other. Ferlyn could see that Flowsand's title had been empowered greatly, the Lens of Time hovering between the girl's eyebrows as a few particles of astral sand spilling out every once in a while. The Book of Time emitted a vast, distant aura, evidently strengthened substantially.

Ferlyn was silent for a long time, and even when she spoke she started with a sigh, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Flowsand said with determination, "Without me, everything he has in Faelor will crumble very quickly."

"But you should understand. The closer you are to him now, the lower the chances of you breaking from your binds in the future. Every time you use a spell without a ritual you're only rolling further into the chains."

"I know."

"We are the priestesses of the Eternal Dragon. As enormous as our power can grow, it requires an even greater price. You will ultimately realise that being indebted to the old dragon is the worst decision one could ever make. You will soon find yourself sinking further into a quagmire of debt which you will ultimately be unable to repay. I can still help you escape right now."

Flowsand shook her head again.

Ferlyn sighed helplessly, "Then let him know about your

decision!”

Flowsand smiled, “There’s no need. He’s very smart, he will be able to tell.”

Ferlyn looked at Flowsand and shook her head, “He’s still too young. Engrossed in charging forward, no idea how to treasure the people and things around him. You’re only saying this to make me feel relieved.”

“My choice isn’t all that bad, you know. Am I not just taking your position?”

A screen of light lit up in the quiet room at that moment, revealing Jacqueline’s silhouette, “Your Excellencies, Richard is here with offerings. He hopes to pay off his debt.”

“Understood. Flowsand, go have a look,” Ferlyn instructed.

The moment the girl left, Ferlyn’s sigh rang throughout the dark, gloomy hall. She once had the same thoughts, decades ago, but now she was the high priestess. The Church of the Eternal Dragon had become her ultimate home.

In the teleportation hall of the Church, four priestesses were surrounding the ancient skeleton as they inspected it. They were all quite experienced, possessing considerable authority in the field of determining an offering’s value. Richard was busy using the time to work on the portal to Faelor, replenishing its mana and perfecting the formations in order to strengthen the passage.

“Why do you always have so many offerings?” a familiar voice rang out behind him, causing him to stand up in pleasant surprise.

“I always have my way. How is it, become my exclusive priestess!” Richard said half-jokingly. However, these words caused the remaining priestesses to look at Flowsand enviously.

The Eternal Dragon did not require much devotion from his clerics. As long as they oversaw enough sacrificial ceremonies, their power would automatically grow. The participating clerics in

every ritual gained a certain amount of divine grace based on their function, and the advantage in following Richard was obvious. Flowsand had been with him for less than a month in Norland time, but she was already two levels higher while the Book of Time had been strengthened substantially. How much divine grace did that require? Right after Richard had returned from the other plane, he had announced two rune sets that shocked all of Faust and granted him the title of royal runemaster. Now, he had managed to take out a great offering in the blink of an eye.

The priestesses quickly set a value for the remains. Even after repaying what he owed, Richard was left with a lot of surplus. Flowsand glanced at the estimates, quickly running into a warehouse in the rear as she left Richard to wait. A short while later, she walked out with two staffs.

Both were about a metre long, made of gold and shaped more like sceptres. The tip of each held the carving of an angel, but both angels only had a single wing. The wing on the left one was feathery white, while the other was fleshy black.

Flowsand stuffed them both into Richard's hands, "There's a lot of grace left over with the remains, so why not exchange it for something from the Church? These staffs aren't bad, let's get them. Just nice, one for you and one for me."

"Oh... Sure." Flowsand tone brooked no room for discussion, she had just been informing him. Richard thus had no choice but to agree, taking the staffs. However, seeing the expressions of the priestesses around him he decided to carefully evaluate them.

His time in the Deepblue had already qualified him as an appraiser. Both these staffs had six enchantments each, definitely at the level of legendary items. On top of that, both had their own emphases. The white-winged staff greatly strengthened buffing spells, while the dark-winged one empowered all sorts of attacks and curses. These staffs were basically a permanent boost to one's magic.

“Good stuff!” Richard praised.

Flowsand snorted, snatching the white-winged staff, “Of course! Would I ever choose anything bad?”

The priestesses looked at each other with peculiar expressions. The Twins of Destiny, comparable to divine items, were just ‘good stuff?’ However, Flowsand bringing them out from the warehouse meant she had obtained high priestess Ferlyn’s permission. They wouldn’t be meddlesome and gossipy.

“That’s right, I have to go to the Forest Plane the day after to quell a rebellion. Let’s go together,” Richard said.

“We still have to take care of a rebellion? Do we even have enough time? Don’t forget that every day here is ten on Faelor.”

“It’s alright. We still have the superior army there, so it won’t take much time. Three to five days at most.”

“Alright, remember to call me when the time comes.” Flowsand had absolute confidence in Richard’s commandership.

## Book 3, Chapter 49 - To Cherish

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“Wait,” Richard stopped Flowsand from leaving, “I found something strange in the family castle. I feel like it’s an offering, but I can’t be sure. Call a few priestesses over to appraise it; we can just use it directly.”

“Taking advantage of me again?” Flowsand asked with an indistinct smile.

“We always take advantage of our people, go quickly!” If not for the priestesses around them looking on, Richard would have slapped her rear.

When Flowsand returned to the side hall again, Noelene and Ferdinand were following behind her. The group followed Richard back to the Archeron island, all the way up to the top floor.

The heavily wrapped astral beast head still lay calmly in the place where Gaton normally contemplated things in silence. Everyone couldn’t help but shiver the moment they saw it. Richard had prior experience, but even Noelene and Ferdinand couldn’t help but take half a step back. This thing was definitely unordinary.

Noelene carefully appraised the wrapping material, crying out in surprise, “This is antimagic cloth! A legendary item that can isolate space completely! What could even be inside that requires this cloth to hold it?”

“Let me see.” Ferdinand took a step forward, gathering all his energy to protect his body before cautiously lifting up a corner of the cloth. His energy was a blazing red; when gathered completely, it seemed to condense and float around him in the form of bright red crystals.

When the cloth was lifted to show a small crack, it exposed a piece of azure skin covered in sheets of crystalline scales. The images of broken planes flashed past the translucent sclerite.

Noelene's entire body jolted with a single glance. She suddenly thought of something, immediately shrieking with all her might, "Don't open it!"

However, she was already too late. The antimagic cloth was pulled up a little too far, revealing a thin line on a cyan eyeball.

Ferdinand's reaction speed was incomparable. He immediately let go of the cloth when he heard the warning, backing away in an instant. However, it was still too late. The energy around him was suddenly smeared with blue light, disappearing instantly. His left arm was dyed the same colour.

The paladin screamed, withdrawing ten metres in a single moment. But even though he fell back, his arm did not follow. Be it the vambrace, the clothes, or the arm itself, everything was soaked in an azure radiance from the inside out.

Right before Richard and the rest, the arm suddenly exploded into shiny stardust that fell slowly. It was like an illusion, an illusion that brought a sudden chill to the bottom of every heart in the room. All of them lost their voices for a moment.

"Astral beast's head!" Noelene's voice was trembling with the terror of the brush with death. Although she was a priestess herself — or perhaps because of it — she cherished her life greatly.

Fortunately, Ferdinand had controlled his energy when he drew back, safely dropping the antimagic cloth back on the astral beast's eye. If not for that, perhaps it would not have been just an arm. There was an incomparable glossy section left on his shoulder, the wound covered in a layer of light blue crystal.

"How did this thing appear here?" Priestess Noelene asked with lingering fear, her face pale.

Astral beasts were extremely powerful even by Norland's standards. If an invasion was handled inappropriately, it could lead to a small disaster. Even after dying, as long as their eyes were

still intact, the beasts' gazes would hold boundless power. And it just so happened that their eyeballs were the toughest part of their bodies.

Richard's expression was ghastly as well, "Master sent it some time ago."

"Her Excellency Sharon? No wonder." Noelene showed an expression of admiration at the mention of the legendary mage. This astral beast's head was enough to prove just how powerful she was.

A peculiar layer of pale gold emerged on Ferdinand's face, but his tone was still relatively stable, "Forgive me, I think I have to rush back to the Church immediately. The wound needs to be treated right away." Saying that, he quickly flew out of the open window and disappeared in a flash.

Noelene took another look at the astral beast's head, saying with a complicated expression, "Richard, I'm afraid we'll need Priestess Ferlyn to appraise this offering personally. I can only take it back to the Church for now, but I can be certain that it already surpasses the standard of a greater offering."

Richard thought things over for a while, "Alright, I only have one request. Flowsand is to conduct the ceremony."

This caused even the stoic Noelene to display an envious expression. "Understood, I will definitely pass on this request to the high priestess."

Flowsand smiled faintly, directly kissing Richard on the lips without a care that Noelene was beside them. She then followed the priestess to leave. Noelene picked up the astral beast's head and left from the window, also taking Flowsand as well. It as a subconscious display of the strength of the Church's priestesses.

Once Flowsand and Noelene had left, Richard was basically done with handling everything. All that was left was to wait, to wait



until the new supplies and transacted goods got to their intended locations. Normally he would make use of such time to craft runes — the process also helped him grow his magic— or alternatively, he would meditate. Having just become a level 12 mage, he had a lot of room for improvement. There was no limit to the effort he could put in. However, just before he left for one of the two, a question suddenly popped into his mind. What was this floor used for?

As he looked around, all Richard saw was an absolutely empty space without anything, not even the most fundamental of decoration. The entirety of the wall facing him was an open-air window— no, more accurately speaking the entirety of the wall facing him had been torn down. That was how the massive astral beast head had managed to get in.

There were no dividing walls on the entire floor, no rooms. It was simply a huge, barren space that was incomparably empty. The astral beast head had taken up all his focus whenever he had come here before, but now that it was taken away he was left with a full, clear view of this place.

Every inch of land on the floating island was worth its weight in gold. Gaton wasn't in the habit of indulging in a luxurious lifestyle, why would he leave the entire floor empty?

Richard wandered around with purpose, carefully looking through every corner. He eventually found a slightly glossy area, a seeming trace of being sat on often.

He sat down in the location after some thought. Looking around, he discovered that Faust and all of its floating islands were blocked by the remaining floors. All he could see was the endless sky. In the daytime, it would be a pure, clear blue. At night, it would be the Rainbow of the Moons.

However, did he even want to see anything? Or perhaps, was that what he wanted to see?

## Book 3, Chapter 50 - To Cherish(2)

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A new thought slowly came to Richard's mind, 'This man's ambition can't be so small.' Perhaps Gatton really didn't want to see anything when he sat here.

He thus closed his eyes and gave in to the surroundings, feeling the strong wind hitting him in the face. He slowly started to feel something, but couldn't place a finger on it. Still, he maintained his patience and returned to a state of peace. A strong foundation in meditation was finally put to use, slowly turning him tranquil.

However, this wasn't meditation exactly. He was just sitting there calmly, emptying his head and heart.

When the heart was emptied, one could finally put in something new. How much could be put in depended on how large the place was. Richard felt like he couldn't put too much inside: just two images of the future and it was almost full.

But that man? That man seemed like he could hold the entire world within him... Or perhaps only one silhouette.

Richard finally opened his eyes after what seemed like an eternity, breathing out a puff of turbid air before standing up with a sigh. It was already the next evening.

He leaned against the windowsill, looking at the lights of the city below. The green moon hung high in the sky, the faint moonlight dancing amongst the stars to paint an endless picture. However, behind this facade of glory lay an entire world of conspiracy, of luxuries and desires darker than the night. Below the beautiful sky lay a city of sin.

He was originally engrossed in this darkness, fighting to the best of his ability as he hoped to emerge at the top of this chaos one day. And yet, time and time again, he was proven wrong. The end of his journey was oh so far away. However, that man was standing at

the top of this mess already.

Richard knew his journey had only begun. As long as he trudged forward without end, he would reach it someday.

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The steward was standing by the staircase, clearly waiting for him for what seemed to have been a long time.

The old man still hadn't recovered completely from his injuries. Even though divine spells could heal the wounds, the damage to his muscles and bones needed time to fix. It was still rather hard for him to move about. And yet, despite all that pain, he insisted on getting off the bed to fulfil his duties the moment Richard came back. At the very least, his back was still ramrod straight.

"Young Master, two visitors are waiting for you in the lounge. Fourth Prince Nyris and Agamemnon Ironblood."

"Nyris and Agamemnon? That's strange... Alright, bring me to them."

Nyris stood up the moment Richard stepped into the lounge, laughing, "How primitive is your lounge?! Don't the Archerons have nine... wait no, ten personal planes now? Still so stingy, you can't even bear to decorate this pathetic place."

Richard was rather speechless as that. He understood that luxury was a part of royalty etiquette, but Gaton had never been too particular about such things.

"This wasn't what we came for," Agamemnon cut the prince off.

Nyris could only yield, "Right. Richard, I heard there's a rebellion in your Forest Plane and it's pretty obvious the Dragon Mage couldn't handle it herself. Or should I say she doesn't want to handle it herself? Anyway, you'll definitely be going there to help her, which is what brings me here. We want to fight alongside you."

“In the Forest Plane?” Richard looked confused. This issue had nothing to do with either of them, so he couldn’t understand their interest in it. Were they war maniacs?

“Well... this is a family affair,” he eventually said tactfully. He wasn’t too worried about them looking into the plane— after all, both the royal family and Grand Duke Ironblood possessed so much more than the Archerons in terms of wealth; their problem wasn’t in finding planes, it was in finding people to develop them. However, inviting or even just allowing members of other families to participate in a private war held a lot of significance as well.

“Don’t worry too much about it, just think you’re helping me okay? I’ll owe you one after this! Hey, are you doubting my ability? Even though I’m more handsome than you, my fist is pretty tough too!” Nyris’ voice was getting louder, almost like he was growing angry.

Richard was rather dumbfounded at the overreaction; he almost couldn’t fathom this royal’s way of thinking, “Alright, alright! We’ll be leaving at six in the morning tomorrow. The portal is right here.”

“Got it, we’ll be on time!” Nyris grew uncharacteristically cheerful, dragging Agamemnon out the door.

Richard shook his head. The two were treating this as a game; although both were outstanding individuals that could compare to saints when fully armoured, wars were different from duels. Extraordinary fighters were helpful, but they weren’t everything.

It was early into the night when he moved to Gaton’s command centre, switching the magic table to a map of the Forest Plane again. He rested his chin on his hand, thinking over war plans repeatedly. Of course, the scenarios in his mind mostly involved Lina’s troops, himself, and Flowsand; he didn’t include Nyris and Agamemnon at all. This wasn’t so much distrust of their abilities as the fact that he was used to relying on people he had full control

over.

He was so focused he didn't notice Lina's shadow pass him by. The Dragon Mage was heading for her room— every one of Gaton's knights had a personal suite on this level— but she immediately turned back and fixed her gaze onto him.

The command centre was dimly lit, magic light spilling down from the ceiling to be reflected off the map. Richard stood right between the two, deep in thought. The angles of his face were carved out perfectly by the shadows, revealing a hint of the stone-like will hidden in his boyish features. It gave him another layer of charm.

In a flash, it was as though she'd seen Gaton himself standing there.

Gaton always pondered over every little detail before a war. This rough brute had a rather meticulous side to him— every miracle carved by his hands was a product of endless preparation.

She hadn't thought Richard's involvement in the Forest Plane would help improve anything drastically; the only goal was to put the pretty little boy in a difficult spot. The backup plan was already in place; once Richard failed, she would abandon the troops and chip away at the rebel army herself until all of them were vanquished. She could grievously wound the enemy saint in a single blow anyway; the protection of the magic towers would only prolong the torture.

Such a victory would greatly delay their development into the plane. It would also force her to recuperate for a while. Nevertheless, in the current situation guarding the plane was much more important than developing it.

The request for his assistance was only an excuse so she could witness him in the middle of adversity. The boy was still young and with a promising future, time was definitely on his side. He was already beyond outstanding when compared to anyone else of

his age.

But somehow, looking at him right now, a strange idea popped inside her head. Would Richard actually win this war? Was he, too, a man of miracles?

Who knew? Hadn't miracles already been formed at his hand? Everyone knew he had the gift to be a runemaster, but two rune sets in his first conference? That alone put his reputation on par with runemaster Lugatti!

Perhaps, just perhaps... He just might win.

Time passed quickly as Lina was lost in her own world of predictions. In the blink of an eye, it was time for them to leave. The Dragon Mage built a small portal in the castle's chambers, gathering Richard, Flowsand, Nyris, and Agamemnon.

Richard's friends seemed to be sufficiently prepared. Both were covered in legendary armour sets, their weapons even stronger than that. Agamemnon had a spatial box with who knows how many supplies, while Nyris himself had a bangle and two rings as well.

The equipment was over the top, so much so that even Richard was shocked, "How long do you guys plan to stay there?"

"Don't we need at least a month or two to put down the rebellion?" Nyris patted Richard's shoulders as he laughed heartily, "Don't worry 'bout me! I packed enough for all four of us for three!"

Richard was rendered completely speechless. Instead of responding, he just jumped into the portal head first.

The first thing he saw on the other side was an endless forest. Forest Plane, a fitting name indeed. There was seemingly no end to the trees, their thick canopy covering the sky as they breathed incomparably fresh air into the surroundings.

Richard took a breath of the damp air and his heart immediately

started beating hard. He instantly fell to the ground with a loud thud, his body stiff and still.

A sharp arrow hissed its way through the air above him, burying itself into the trunk of a big tree. The rear end was still vibrating from the impact.

He immediately leapt up and whipped out two fireball spells to constrict the attacker. What followed was acidic fog covering the area the arrow had come from.

## Book 3, Chapter 51 - Revolt

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A pained roar rang out from the forest, followed by sharp coughs. The assassin was clearly tormented by the sudden barrage of spells. Position confirmed, Richard shot out a flame arrow deep into the forest, bringing the coughs to an abrupt end.

With the would-be assassin eliminated efficiently, Richard finally had the time to properly inspect his surroundings.

The portal hadn't formed within the camp, instead in an empty space nearby. A small team of ten warriors were stood on guard, but the battle had started and ended so quickly that they didn't even have the time to run over from their rest areas.

Thirty metres from the portal was where the dense forest began. The camp was completely surrounded, only a single side exposed to an open area.

Lina stepped out right behind Richard, paling the moment she saw Richard covered in mud and an arrow not far away, "Oh dear! I forgot to tell you, some of the archers from this plane attack when you exit the portal. Their arrows are very powerful, often even poisonous! Are you hurt? Where are they? The shouldn't have run far, I'll go catch them immediately."

Richard's expression did not change in the face of Lina's late warning and her concern, "No need, I've already eliminated them."

"Eliminated?" Lina was shocked. She knew just how cunning the snipers of this plane were. The forest was their world, and the well-known figures amongst their ranks were extremely talented at archery. It was impossible to ascertain their positions based on the trajectory of the arrows alone; even she had lost track of some.

If one wanted to catch these people, level was secondary. Most important was a quick and accurate response coupled with high



cast speed. That was something one only accrued over countless bloody battles. Richard was only seventeen... Just how many battles had he experienced that he had such ability?

Richard's heart skipped slightly at Lina's reaction, making him wonder if he had done something amazing. But of course, he wouldn't let this thought show on his face. He instead turned to the dazed warriors standing at the side, "You lot, go find and retrieve the assassin's body."

The warriors hesitated. They obviously didn't know who Richard was, but the defence he had just executed with the storm of spells left a deep impression. It was rare to see such a violent barrage even from Lina. Still, the clearly unusual relationship this youth shared with their commander wasn't enough to make them obey his orders.

These warriors had all been fighting in planar wars for a long time, something that made them all fierce and untameable. Threading the line between life and death all year round, none of them knew if they would survive the next battle. They had the guts to fight even legendary powerhouses, using their very lives to bury the enemy.

Seeing them not moving, Lina immediately shouted, "This is Lord Gaton's son, royal runemaster of the Sacred Alliance, Young Master Richard Archeron! His orders are equivalent to mine!"

Only then did the warriors make their way towards the forest, dragging a dead body back after a while.

Lina's curved brows couldn't help but lift at the sight of the body. She squatted next to it, carefully examining all traces. At the same moment, the portal flashed incessantly as Flowsand, Nyris, and Agamemnon stepped out one after the other. The first thing they saw was the native's body.

Flowsand only took a simple look, not paying any more attention, but the two youths grew extremely serious. They

surrounded the corpse with Lina, carefully checking it without missing a single detail.

All three had sharp eyes. They immediately noticed that there were four traces of magic on the body: two fireballs, acid fog, and the fatal blow of the flame arrow. However, judging from these traces, the spells had been unbelievably fast.

There were many criteria on which one could judge a mage's battle ability. Even if casting speed wasn't the most important, it was still incredibly useful. This native was undoubtedly eliminated by Richard, the question was how a mere level 12 mage could cast as fast as most grand mages.

The being on the ground looked very similar to an elf from Norland, with long and pointed ears that were meant to use the wind to detect movements. Their face was handsome, with a big nose and a pair of large, bright eyes; clearly, they could also smell and see very well. The proportions were great as well: long, athletic body with powerful muscles. The skin had mostly been destroyed by the spells, but a small portion that still remained seemed to be a bluish green. In the gloomy forest, this would serve as natural camouflage.

The Schumpeters had termed these beings forest elves; when the Archerons acquired control of the plane, they continued using this term.

Agamemnon suddenly flipped over the forest elf's body, revealing a totem tattoo on a piece of the skin that was still intact. He scraped off a bit of the ink and tasted it with his mouth, his face changing a little, "Strong antimagic properties, enough to drop a spell by two grades."

Nyris' expression changed a little at this, and he couldn't help but glance at Richard. Neither he nor Agamemnon had been shocked by the forest elf's magic resistance, the surprising thing was that Richard's spells had still caused a normal amount of damage

despite it. Was the fellow so lucky that he also had a spell boost or magic penetration?

Lina was very excited as well. A grand mage herself, she could tell that all of Richard's spells had been augmented with a magic penetration effect, something both mages and antimages hated the most.

Her gaze was different when she looked back at Richard. She now knew that no mage at the same level could ever defeat Richard. Forget the strange casting speed and the magic penetration, his incomparably keen reaction alone would leave him undefeated in most battles. If she hadn't been sure of his level, she would even have suspected that some grand mage had taken care of the attacker, just with spells below grade 6.

Richard's boosted thinking speed from the blessing of wisdom already put him on the level of a normal grand mage. On top of that, the endless bloodbaths in the Bloodstained Lands had honed his battle sense greatly.

The expressions of the three surrounding the corpse grew more and more interested. Richard had originally wanted to suppress Lina a little, to pacify her, but he didn't think they would take so much information from this body. His true battle strength was revealed a little.

He didn't know what they were thinking, but instinct told him something was not right. Their gazes made him feel very uncomfortable, but because he didn't understand he just pretended to sigh calmly. It was also a convenient way to let out the heat from his Archeron blood.

Blaze was stronger than Eruption. Every time he activated it, Richard felt like his blood had turned into lava. As the Archeron bloodline grew more powerful, Richard felt like the way he did things was slowly changing as well.

Lina suddenly gave a shout of surprise, lifting her head to look

around until her gaze finally fell onto Richard. Her expression was complicated, the frighteningly bright gaze causing Richard to feel incredibly uneasy. Unable to tell what it meant, he could only barely put on a faint smile and wait for her to continue.

Yet, there was no continuation. The Dragon Mage just buried her head into examining the corpse once more.

Richard didn't know that the hot breath he just spewed out filled the air nearby with a blazing aura. This aura contained a faint scent of sulphur, just like the smell of magma.

Every rise of Gaton's sword, every spur of his horse as he waved his army forward was always accompanied by a thick, volcanic smell. This blazing aura always increased the confidence of Lina and her companions a hundred times over, regardless of whether their opponent was a peerless powerhouse or a magnificent army with thousands of soldiers. They would always swing their weapons, charging forward without hesitation!

Head bowed, Lina couldn't completely suppress the expression of happiness that started to cover her face. In the midst of the joy sprouted a faint expectation: this kid had more surprises in store.

The guards placed the forest elf's weapons next to his body: a longbow that was more than 1.5m long as well as a dagger. Richard tried to pull on the bow, but he discovered that he couldn't send the string back completely without Eruption. As for the dagger, it was extremely rough without a single enchantment. This alone was enough to give him a basic understanding of the style of the forest elves.

It took a bit of effort to get the three people off the corpse, heading to the camp. The first thing Richard did after taking command was to have all the battle-worthy warriors line up according to their class, checking all their names against a roster one by one.

He worked fast, but even so it took nearly two hours to check the

more than two thousand warriors from beginning to end once.

Nyris and Agamemnon were stood at the side throughout the entire process, watching on with a surprising amount of patience. In fact, Agamemnon's eyes had followed Richard from start to finish.

When an hour had passed, Nyris had been unable to hold it in as he asked in a low voice, "What is he doing exactly? Did he read too many memoirs or something?"

"He's exactly the same as when he started," Agamemnon had mentioned.

This had immediately perked up the prince who watched carefully to realise that it was indeed the case. Richard had spent almost the same amount of time on each soldier, asking the same old questions, but most important was that the boring and monotonous process had seemingly had no impact on him. He had been just as focused and serious as at the start, not omitting a single word even though the same questions had been asked hundreds of times.

It was a terrifying amount of patience.

## Book 3, Chapter 52 - Revolt(2)

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Even as Agamemnon's words changed Nyris' expression, Lina was standing shocked by the side. She had no idea what Richard was doing, but his meticulousness still astonished her. Nobody wanted an enemy like him, not even the Dragon Mage.

The only one unaffected was Flowsand. The cleric had headed to a tent the moment Richard began, falling deep asleep. Planar teleportation was a draining affair, and she needed to recover well.

The rest might not have known Richard's intentions, but she did. It was nothing too amazing; he was just using the excuse of the roll call to get some understanding of the abilities of every soldier. He frequently did the same back on Faelor as well, which was why he had a precise grasp on how best to use his people in battle. A fight that could be won by ten soldiers would at most be allocated to eleven.

When it finally ended, everyone outside of Richard heaved a sigh of relief.

"Officers, forward!" Richard's command caused a hundred officers of varying ranks to stand out. He then put the register away, coldly scanning through these fierce soldiers; their eyes had been full of an untamed savagery when the Dragon Mage had handed over command. He spoke up after a moment, "All of you are being reorganised. Company 1, Squad 1..."

Richard spoke quickly but the well-trained officers and soldiers that were called on promptly gathered to form the new teams. At some point during the process, many of the soldiers' expressions changed. His voice never paused, and he hadn't taken a single look at the register from the start. It was as though he had memorised all of their names during the roll call, but... how was that even possible?

And yet, once the reorganisation was done, everyone was

shocked to find that Richard really had remembered everyone. Not one of the soldiers had been left behind! He placed his hands behind his back and shouted, “Everyone is to remember their squads. My commands will only go to the company captains... All of you are to distinctly remember your numbers and follow orders without fail. Anyone who disobeys will be beheaded.

“We’re setting out at eight in the morning, we attack at nine. All of you, get some rest!”

The two thousand plus soldiers returned to their tents in order, leaving a few dozens in the training grounds. These were the captains Richard had picked out; they were all required to memorise the code names for his orders before they could sleep.

Nyris and Agamemnon were still standing at the side of the field. The prince had his hand on his chin, “Richard seems to be adept at war.”

“Seems to be? If you two were using the same military forces with over a thousand troops, he can annihilate you thrice over.” Agamemnon did not hold back.

Nyris hummed reluctantly, “We’ll only know if we fight. Besides, why should I use an army like he does? Can’t I just rush into his command centre and kill him directly? He’s just a level 12 mage.”

Agamemnon pretended not to have heard anything, causing the prince to shrug helplessly, “Alright, alright! I’m inferior to Richard, okay? Wait, something’s not right... Richard’s going to his quarters? All the troops were organised, why aren’t we included? He isn’t even considering the two of us in his plans, is he? We’re definitely at the top tier here!”

“The top tier of neglect, it seems like.” The taciturn Agamemnon made a rare joke.

Nyris’ pretty little face was already turning red. Feeling like there was no point in standing alone in the field, he resentfully entered

his tent and fell deep asleep.

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Richard stayed awake inside the command tent, studying the terrain of Emerald City from the map table.

The key to this battle would be the enemy's three magic towers. They were all the most elementary of towers, primarily serving to weaken any spells cast within their domain greatly. All three combined, they suppressed Lina's magic until it wasn't too much of a threat. Another function came in the form of a mana attack that was comparable to a grade 6 spell. Even grand mages had to be careful with them.

The original point of these three towers was to fight the forest elves. Because the damage they could do to a single target didn't matter all that much, they had been designed for long-ranged area offensives. Given how primitive the magic of the elves was, the mana suppression functions were extremely basic. However, if every tower was used in harmony the defensive ability was still great, especially with a saint coordinating their tactics. It was these three towers that had allowed the rebel army to fight off two attacks led by Lina despite a disadvantage in numbers.

The abilities of a magic tower depended entirely on the support of its mana pool. There were mechanisms to draw atmospheric mana into it, but there were limits to that ability. One of the best ways to remove the threat of a magic tower was to charge straight in and kill the controlling mages. Another was to empty its mana pool, rendering it useless. Of course, one could also attack the tower itself. If the defences were destroyed, the magic formations would be damaged and lose their effects.

In their current circumstances, the towers were not an offensive threat. The rebel army was relying on them to suppress Lina's magic, and every spell they weakened consumed a lot of energy from the pool. Looking at their positions on the map, new plans



constantly flowed through Richard's mind. It took him a while to decide on a few that would attack the towers, the saint, as well as the regular soldiers of the enemy army.

.....

Eight in the morning the next day, 2,300 soldiers entered formation before marching towards Emerald City. Without any roles or orders, Nyris and Agamemnon just followed behind.

The two were covered in armour from head to toe, even their faces covered in helmets. The armour was obviously custom made, and the faint ripples of magic coming off them were an indication that they weren't cheap. A close look would reveal excellent lines that made it obvious how expensive the materials were, but despite that there were no decorative motifs or any other sign of extravagance on these sets. It was all an unremarkable grey, dull to the point that it was slightly unpresentable. A few obvious cracks could be seen at the seams.

To the untrained eye, both of them looked like pitiful knights that didn't have the money to even eat properly.

## Book 3, Chapter 53 - Revolt(3)

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When Richard first saw Nyris and Agamemnon, he couldn't help but be stunned for a moment. The cracks on their armour were unbelievable: the royal family and Duke Ironblood should be able to fix two sets of armour, right? These two were in the line of succession, not some faraway relatives...

However, closer inspection changed his expression greatly. These were no cracks, instead marks drawn on by a master artist!

On the edge between life and death, if anyone believed the armour couldn't take another blow and tried to push a blade into the cracks, their efforts were fated to end in failure. However, few would be able to see these armour sets and not be fooled. Even with Truth, Richard had only discovered this shameless guise after careful scrutiny.

In stark contrast with the armour, the weapons of the two were shining gorgeously. Nyris carried a large two-handed sword that was nearly as tall as himself, the edge a translucent bright red that looked like crystal. A part of the blade was jagged, and even if the prince didn't activate his energy it was continuously emitting a flame-like glow. The entire sword seemed to be formed of burning lava. Agamemnon's weapon was a comically large spiked hammer, bundles of multicolour light dancing from end to end.

The powerful auras of these weapons could not be concealed. Each was likely even better than Extinction which was on his back. Richard believed that the sheer power of the enchantments made all disguises pointless; if not for that, the weapons might have cracks on them as well.

Both weapons were extremely heavy and powerful. The warhorses that had been specially picked out for the two could not take on the weight and needed to be changed after a short gallop. The two changed horses six or seven times overall during the

journey, causing the officer in charge of logistics to roll his eyes incessantly.

An hour later, Emerald City appeared before Richard's eyes.

The walls of the city were not exactly high, less than ten metres tall. Everything was made entirely of wood, clearly meant to defend against wild beasts and not enemy troops. This was because the forest elves were proficient at climbing stealthily; no matter how high the walls got, they wouldn't pose much of an obstacle. It was the magic towers that could discover them whenever they entered the magic suppression domain.

The army halted just outside the range of the towers, slowly spreading out in formation. Richard watched the enemies on the city wall from atop his warhorse, various numbers flitting through his vision as the entire battlefield was analysed in his mind.

He felt uncomfortable and sticky by the time he was done, wiping at his body only to come up with a damp hand. This plane was extremely humid, the atmosphere slightly foggy and the sun dimmer than on Norland. It was as though the sunlight was tinted by the green.

Trees everywhere, dew everywhere, green everywhere. Such was the Forest Plane.

There were numerous cave-ins in the city wall. Some of that had happened during Gaton's initial assault on the area, while many others were traces of Lina's attacks on the city. Their only use was in the battlements giving the archers a vantage point.

"Cavalry, standby. Infantry, archers, advance!" Richard finally sent down the order to start the battle.

Groups of armoured footsoldiers immediately lifted their tower shields, advancing towards Emerald City. The archers practically stuck to the infantry in front of them, using the defence of the huge shields. The army slowly marched forward while a hundred

cavalrymen lined up behind Richard, awaiting orders.

The enemy archers began to fire, loosing a messy rain of arrows towards them. However, there was little damage to Richard's soldiers as they continued to press closer and enter firing range. A single order had all of their own archers shoot together, four hundred arrows forming a shower that was concentrated on a small, isolated section of the wall.

There were dozens of archers and footsoldiers on that section, but the focused fire from tens of times their number left them with serious casualties. The Archeron archers pulled back on their heavy longbows once more, clearing another section of the wall with their fast, sharp arrows. The rebel army was immediately flustered, the counterattack very weak.

By the time Richard ordered the third volley out, few enemies could be seen within range anymore. The three strikes had killed a little less than a hundred enemies. Although a single barrage didn't cover too much area, anyone caught within it faced almost certain death. This completely shocked the rebel army; nobody was willing to expose themselves to the possibility of such an attack.

The front line thus moved forward slowly, while the central formation that protected Richard followed. When they were a little less than 200 metres from the city wall, he had them all enter staggered formation; he knew they were nearing the towers' attack range.

The thousand plus divided into their own ten-man squads, each with at least twenty metres of distance from the others as they advanced. The only large, crowded group was the central formation that Richard was in.

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Within Emerald City, Commander Endor had his brows furrowed as a bad premonition overtook him. Whenever a battle normally reached this point, Lina would have flown into the air to show off

her power. The giant dragon of hers would send down torrents of flames from the sky, while the ordinary soldiers were almost completely useless. Both armies basically fought autonomously, with no energy nor desire to interfere in the battle between the powerhouses.

Endor only needed to tie Lina down with the help of the magic suppression domains of the towers, occasionally threatening her so she couldn't drop her defence and just attack one of the towers. The two unoccupied towers could thus switch to offence as needed, inflicting massive casualties on the Archeron elites.

Although both Lina and Endor believed the battle between the armies to only be an adornment to the true war, these troops were still elites. Lina would feel the pain of the losses, left with no choice but to retreat.

But things were entirely different this time! The enemy had been in neat formation from the moment they appeared, striking at the weakness of the rebel army— the lack of trained archers. A few volleys of arrows dealt a dire blow to their morale. On top of that, the Dragon Mage hadn't taken action yet! She was merely following the central formation as they slowly advanced!

## Book 3, Chapter 54 - War Of Attrition

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Was the enemy trying to win using her army? Endor felt that such a thing was hard to believe. When someone as powerful as the Dragon Mage existed amongst their ranks, how would they even think of attacking Emerald City with the troops alone?

He massaged his head repeatedly. Even though his hair was already half white, every strand still straight like a steel fibre. A single touch of his firm hair would normally boost his confidence, but no such thing was happening today.

This was the exact situation Endor didn't want to see. His army was inferior to the Archerons; if they lost, the Archeron soldiers would rush into the city. That would be the end!

Although these warriors didn't pose much of a threat to him personally, they could still attack the magic towers. Given the limited space in the towers, the warriors would overwhelm his mages with sheer numbers alone. And the moment he lost the assistance of the towers, he would have to escape immediately. The slightest of hesitation and he wouldn't be able to escape from Lina's clutches.

The Dragon Mage was powerful beyond her level.

A hazy glow fell down from the sky, enveloping all of Emerald City. The three magic towers were now operating at full capacity, reducing the might of any spells in their domain by one or two grades.

The Archeron troops had already entered the range of the towers. However, looking at the scattered troops of the enemy, Endor hesitated to launch the attacks. The enemy was moving slowly and strangely; the scattered soldiers would be ground up by the combined bulk of his troops, but if the towers were activated a single attack would only cover three squads at best. These elementary towers had limited mana pools; the precious attacks

could only be used at crucial points.

It was at this time that Lina finally flew into the sky. This left Endor even more hesitant to allow the towers to fire at will. Past experience told him now was the exact time that she would cause chaos with a barrage of spells.

“Maximise antimagic fields!” Endor yelled, unsheathing his two-handed sword before jumping up the wall. Before the order had even rung out the mages in the towers had swiftly expanded the boundaries of the magic suppression domains, also increasing their might.

Lina’s hands spread open, but just as she was about to start a chant Richard’s voice rang out from below, “Wait, don’t initiate the attack. Just stay there!”

The Dragon Mage was surprised. She did not understand why Richard gave her that order, but she still listened and stopped her attack, remaining floating in the air.

Within a minute of this strange deadlock, Endor’s face had changed. This boosted magic suppression domain consumed lots of mana, but instead of the Dragon Mage it was the army that changed formation and swiftly gathered together, charging straight towards the city. A powerful saint who was more than fifty years old with countless battles under his belt was left at a loss.

There was a dire need to stop these attacking forces, but he couldn’t afford to move. The towers couldn’t waste their attacks either; besides, switching to attack mode would require some time. The absolute worst part was that they couldn’t decide which region to focus the suppression on until Lina attacked. Even though the Dragon Mage could be considered restrained right now, floating silently in the air, there was no way of guessing her target until the moment she attacked.

Endor’s heart was beating faster and faster, impatience washing

over him as he almost initiated the attack himself. However, those few moments of hesitation were enough to land him in great danger. Seeing Richard's troops already heading towards a large gap in the city wall, he finally yelled helplessly, "All soldiers, prepare for the attack!"

Several companies of soldiers rushed towards the gap, trying to block the Archeron army. Both sides were immediately caught up in an intense battle!

The weak cleric on the Archeron side was casting spell after divine spell in an attempt to help. As for the rebel army, they didn't have any clerics in the battle. The Schumpeters had lost all their clerics in Gaton's assault. The norm in planar wars was to wipe out or banish all of the enemy priests.

"Companies 3-10, retreat 20 metres. Companies 1,2,10-14, commence your attack!" The ten or so soldiers in the core formation of the army started bellowing loudly, raising their signal flags as well as using voice amplification magic to pass the orders to all the companies in a flash.

The centre of the army slowly retreated, while the two flanks moved forward in a killing spree. Both sides already locked in combat, the warriors were fighting in close quarters. The change in formation immediately pulled the rebel troops out of the gap in the wall, leading them into a three-pronged attack wherein a massacre ensued.

Lina felt like she finally had a good opportunity to attack. "Richard!" she yelled out.

"Don't move!" Richard replied sternly, continuing to bark out orders, "Companies 3-10, hold positions. 3,5,7,9, forward... Pull back... 6, 10, forward... Pull back..."

Already possessing superior numbers, the Archeron army followed Richard's orders to surround the rebels. A few companies charged forward at a time, showing their might in a swift, fierce



killing before retreating.

The scene was repeated over and over again, Richard's army grinding away at the Schumpeter lives like a millstone. The 400 archers continued to burn through the enemies, wiping out the soldiers on the walls as well as any enemy offensives. They didn't directly help the infantry, but their presence ensured that the rebels didn't dare to gather in a defensive formation. The volleys were precise and powerful, discouraging any close formations. The magic suppression domains did not help against these longbowmen.

"Richard!" Lina shouted, but her plea was once again met with a "Wait!"

With the Dragon Mage unmoving, Endor and the primary magic tower were locked down as well. Unable to keep up the domain eternally, the other two towers were already attacking sporadically. However, the main forces of the two sides were already in a melee so the magical attacks weren't all that useful.

Floating in the sky, the Dragon Mage was obviously unhappy. On the other hand, Endor was sweating profusely. His face betrayed his struggle; whether they moved to attack or not, this was going to be a difficult task. He had to act fast, or it would be too late.

Richard's commandership was exceedingly accurate, able to pinpoint the most chaotic zones to attack to leave the Schumpeters bloody and wounded. The rebels were quickly losing numbers; if this went on, it would only be a matter of time before they were completely defeated. Even now, the fearsome Dragon Mage in the sky hadn't acted yet. Nobody knew when her terrible showers of flame would drop from the sky.

## Book 3, Chapter 55 - War Of Attrition(2)

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Richard arranged for Nyris and Agamemnon to be at the back of the troops, explaining to them that they were needed to prevent a flank from the enemies. However, the rebel forces were already ground away to the point that they didn't have a chance to fight back at all, how would they have the energy to plan a flank? The two youths' weapons were bursting with legendary power, but there was no opportunity for either to use them!

Nyris grew suspicious after a good half of the day, unable to help but ask Agamemnon, "This Richard... could it be that he feels like we've already won?"

Agamemnon seemed to be surprised by the question, slow to respond, "We have."

"What about us?" The prince could not accept the fact that he had been a mere spectator in such a big war.

"Evidently, we have been disregarded." Agamemnon had never cared much for the fourth prince's reputation, nor his own.

"Cavalry, turn right and advance! Enter the city from gap 3, attack tower 2!" Richard finally mobilised the cavalry. A hundred mounted soldiers spurred their horses forward, turning around and bypassing the battlefield as they headed for the city walls.

The move completely warped Endor's expression. Knowing he had no choice left, he flew into the sky with the intent to order the towers to attack. It was at this time that Richard finally unleashed Lina, "You can summon your dragon now."

Finally receiving the command she had been waiting for, the Dragon Mage urgently recited the incantation. It was swift and bitter, strange and extraordinary; a portal appeared in the sky behind her, and a huge dark-red dragon flew out! The enormous creature spread its wings apart, flying around in the sky once

before swooping down. A loud roar rang out as draconic flames rained down on the first magic tower!

This was an adult red dragon!

Even though it was well known that Lina's special ability was to summon a red dragon, the stunning feeling when the real thing was soaring in the sky was something words could not describe.

Summon Red Dragon was a legendary spell, but Lina had managed to cast it as only a grand mage. This showed how special the Dragon Mage was amongst her kind, the reason for her title.

Even though the dragon in the sky was far away, its mighty aura cowered even Richard's horse. The creature incessantly dug into the ground with its hooves, and Richard himself felt his heart pounding. Still, he quickly regained his calm; the greatest strength of mages was their will, and his was like steel.

He looked closely at the red dragon in the sky, taking a full half minute to assess that it was level 19. Based on its battle ability, the dragon surpassed Lina herself.

Up in the sky, Lina pointed at the first tower and roared, "Kaloh, full attack!"

The dragon replied with a long roar, flying up before quickly swooping down. Another burst of hot dragonfire rushed towards the tower.

Many lights were glimmering atop the tower, revealing a magical barrier to the naked eye. The draconic flames clashed directly with the tower's light, instantly setting it ablaze. The lights grew dim, seemingly about to die down, but a burst of mana from within the tower turned them bright once more.

Still, such a weak magic tower could not adequately resist the red dragon's flames on its own. Endor had risen to the sky, his large sword sending out a crescent of energy that extinguished the second burst. Within the suppression zone, the dragonfire was

darkened and weakened to the point that he could deal with it effortlessly. Kaloh roared in anger, sending down another hail of flames.

However, the dragon wasn't the only one for Endor to deal with.

Richard's voice echoed out once more, "Lina, target tower 1. Use all your mana!"

Finally given an opportunity to showcase her full might, the Dragon Mage waved both her hands. A red blaze manifested within, gushing forward towards the tower as though it had a life of its own. This was a spell unique to her; the flames surged forward, no different from the fires of a true dragon. The explosive force wasn't all that great, but the flames were thick and had a far greater range than ordinary fireballs.

As the first wave rushed towards the tower, Endor cried out angrily as he used two sword lights to disperse the flames raining down. This was just like before, with Endor in constant battle with the Dragon Mage to see who would use all their energy up.

However, there was a fundamental difference here. When Richard saw Lina about to cast the second wave of flames, he raised his hand and moved it forward aggressively, "Flowsand! Outburst!"

The Outburst spell! The pale gold radiance did not land on Richard's body, instead enveloping the Dragon Mage!

In a flash, Lina felt all the mana in her body burning, as though she had fallen into a volcano!

"Lina! Attack as fast as you can, only use the draconic flames!" Richard cried out. The Dragon Mage obeyed his instructions, wave after wave of dragonfire appearing in her hands to form a continuous flow towards the tower. It didn't take long for her to discharge more than twenty spells.

When he saw the endless fire, all the hair on Endor's body stood

erect. His eyes widened, his jaw dropped, body growing stiff like he had been hit with a stunning spell. At that moment, his mind was completely blank! Immense fear blocked all thoughts, the feeling like a lone man on the beach suddenly realising a ten-metre-tall tsunami was about to wash over him.

Who could envision a grand mage using up all her mana in a few seconds? The result was almost like a legendary mage was present. Endor's instincts told him to run, but he couldn't help but think, 'The tower is behind me... If I hide...'

This large wave of flames would immediately destroy the tower. If even one of the three magic towers was destroyed, their chances of holding back the Archerons would plummet. Even if Lina came alone in the future, it would be difficult to fend her off. She was a powerful grand mage, possessing an extraordinary bloodline ability as well as many runes that allowed her to fight alongside a red dragon. With the two fighting in tandem, they could defeat an ordinary saint like him easily.

It was this knowledge of the consequences that made Endor hesitate, but soon he realised the flames were moving far too quickly. There was no way of avoiding them even if he wanted to! As the flames flowed over like a river, he realised that even attempting to retreat would be met with the same end.

The flames engulfed him and the tower behind. The battle was over.

From start to finish, Richard had not discharged a single spell.

## Book 3, Chapter 56 - War Of Attrition(3)

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Nyris' throat moved up and down as he swallowed with difficulty, watching everything in disbelief, "It's over?"

"Yes." Agamemnon was as curt as usual.

"But... What did I just see? Was... was that magic?" Nyris gazed towards Lina. While the dragon mage was already swaying, ready to collapse, that did nothing to damage her dazzling image in his mind. Faced with her shower of flames, even a saint would instantly turn to ash if they were slow to escape.

"A spell from Flowsand." Agamemnon was clearly the more discerning of the two.

It was only then that Nyris glanced towards Flowsand, completely stupefied. He suddenly remembered something and couldn't help but shout, "Daybreak?!"

Agamemnon slowly nodded.

"A titled priestess... As expected, they're all..." He didn't complete the sentence. Even a prince could not say anything as he wished.

"Richard's the real lunatic!" Agamemnon asserted, unwittingly finishing the other's sentence. Nobody would dare to say that the titled priestesses of the Eternal Dragon were all crazy, even though it was something they agreed on.

When the Dragon Mage crashed down from the sky, the war finally returned to the normal battle between soldiers. With their commander dead, the rebel army finally broke down and started escaping in all directions.

The Archerons advanced methodically under Richard's command, purging the defeated enemies along the way as they captured Emerald City once more. It was only a matter of time before the battle came to an end.

The third tower had surrendered. The mages inside shut down its domain, walking out in single file to be captured. In contrast, the second had been the site of a terrible battle. The hundred Archeron knights had fought head-on against the mages within, clearing out floor after floor. They gave up their lives to open a path to the top, with only forty left standing by the time they were done.

This was the one part of Richard's plans where the casualties would be immense.

Kaloh hadn't used too much strength on the magic tower. It flew up high into the sky, occasionally pouncing towards the ground and ripping apart the rebels with its sharp teeth and claws. Only when the summoning ended did it roar unwillingly, disappearing into the void.

With the war concluded, Richard relinquished command and left the officers to clear the battlefield. He got off his horse and walked towards Lina; the Dragon Mage had fallen unconscious and plummeted from the sky. Careful examination revealed that she had depleted far too much of her mana, but that only served to relieve him.

'Still, how could Lina not control her magic? She was a grand mage!' he looked up towards Flowsand, and the cleric stuck her tongue out, mouthing words soundlessly. He read her lips and understood what she had said, 'I just punished that old hag a little!'

Many things could be inferred from these words. Richard could only shake his head helplessly.

.....

When Lina woke up once more, she found herself lying in the master residence of Emerald City. Richard, sat by her bed, smiled charmingly, "Looks like I was lucky. I didn't need six days."

Lina didn't say a word, merely staring at the youth in astonishment. He found this strange and touched his face, but

there was nothing on it, “What’s wrong?”

The Dragon Mage’s interest suddenly waned, “I suddenly felt like... No, no it’s nothing. Since this is taken care of, you can return. I’ll stay.”

Richard didn’t understand why Lina’s mood had worsened all of a sudden, and he had no clue of how to comfort her. However, powerhouses like her knew to control themselves. He merely remained seated for a while, leaving the room after he realised she had no intentions of explaining further.

It was time to return to Norland.

That afternoon, Richard brought Flowsand and the two young masters who had gained no achievements out of the Forest Plane. They naturally took along the specialty of the plane when they left, which was a sort of wood that was exceedingly tough. It was a great material for making longbows in Norland, with a value of tens of thousands in gold. However, it would only be worth 10,000 at best in Faelor. The great part about it was that it had no inherent mana, so there was basically no extra cost to transporting it if it was placed in spatial equipment.

Richard and Flowsand entered the portal first. Nyris stopped Agamemnon before they left as well, “Is it really over just like that?”

“What else do you want?”

“Shouldn’t we be the main characters of a moving battle?” the prince asked, unresigned to the outcome.

Even Agamemnon had no answers for this question. The only purpose of the two being here ended up being to help Richard lug a few tons of wood back to Norland.

.....

The goods from the royal family had arrived by the time Richard returned to Norland. He immediately rushed to the castle’s



warehouse, now under heavy guard by both Gatón's personal guard and a squadron from the royal family.

Inside were ten large magic sealing boxes, each half the size of the average human. The guard captain opened them up one by one, handing over a list of what was inside.

Six of the boxes contained dozens of neatly placed swords, all glimmering with a magic lustre and radiating a cold aura: they were enchanted with enhanced sharpness and a cold effect. The swords were all made of lafite steel, a material that was an entire grade above normal high-carbon steel in terms of durability. Each box held fifty unsheathed swords, the blades smeared with thick layers of cold whale oil to protect the blades and prevent mana drain. That made for 300 magic swords in total.

One of the four remaining boxes had twenty small, elaborate crossbows enchanted with precision and increased range. The weapons were clearly better than the average magic crossbow, the primary material being ice fir. This was the same kind of wood Richard had just brought back from the Forest Plane; with the special treatment of the royal bowyers, the weapons were clearly a step above those of the Schumpeters be it in durability or power. Another box held a total of two thousand bolts. A third were enchanted with poison, another third with armour penetration, and the last third with increased range.

The last two boxes contained gauntlets and scale mail inner armour. The armour, despite only having a single enchantment, could be added onto an existing set to greatly increase one's defence. On the other hand, the gauntlet pairs all had two enchantments on them.

## Book 3, Chapter 57 - That Man

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The equipment in these boxes was all of high quality, worth a total of about a million gold. However, if one didn't purchase them in advance, it was very difficult to find such a large back in such little time. Only the royal family and others of their ilk could produce so many premium goods with ease.

This batch was the compensation for the six runes he had given to the royal family. The magic culture in Faelor was a few centuries behind Norland's, so they could all be sold for three times the price out there. Richard was finally about to see profit in planar war.

Once the equipment was all checked, the royal guards left. Richard then had two paladins take turns on guard duty.

When the royal guards left, Richard personally closed the lid of all the magic sealing boxes, sitting on one and sighing lightly. Underneath him was a million gold coins, something that felt inexplicably strange. Just a few years ago, the total proceeds Gatton earned from one of his planes was less than this value.

Just like the old saying: what flowed between the fingers of runemasters was golden sand.

The air in the warehouse was slightly cold and damp. A corner of the eternal warmth formation had been damaged in the riots, and although it was still generally usable there were occasions where it would stop working. This gave it the same smell as a common cellar; one could feel a heavy staleness when breathing.

Richard was in no hurry to leave, just sitting there as he recalled matters of the past. The boxes under him were proof enough that he was far stronger than Gatton had been at the same age. Who knew what that man would think and say if he saw them?

However, he probably never would... Richard suddenly felt like

he needed a drink.

It was only just starting to get dark when he strode out of the warehouse. There was still some time before dinner, so he headed to the study instead of the dining hall. He asked the steward to send a few slices of bread and sat down at the table, spreading out some paper in preparation to write letters to Sharon and Mountainsea.

The pen entered his hand, but the quill would not touch the paper. The runemaster who had drawn countless formations in his life felt blank in front of the empty sheet, not knowing what to write.

“I’m back, but I’m returning immediately. The plane is called Faelor, and it’s very safe.” This was the entirety of his letter to Sharon. Having thought about it for a long time, he had no clue how to address her so he just left the start blank.

The one for Mountainsea was even simpler, “I’m back. I will look for you within the appointed time.”

Richard was sweating profusely by the time these few sentences were done; just these two letters were several times more difficult to finish than any rune. He carefully sealed them both up and called for the old steward, giving them to him. He felt the burden on his shoulders fade a little once the two thin pieces of paper were handed over, letting him relax just a tiny bit more.

Once the butler left, Richard poured himself a drink and worried over various matters while tasting the alcohol in the glass. The cup was quickly emptied, so he poured himself another. The liquor was like fire sliding down his throat, burning up his stomach. He subconsciously picked up a slice of bread whenever the burn got too uncomfortable, swallowing it in a few mouthfuls and feeling much better. He would then pour himself another glass...

His mind wandered everywhere amidst the burning alcohol, allowing him to ponder over a great many things. He thought

about the Deepblue Aria, about his promise to visit Mountainsea at Klandor. Richard was no fool; it was obvious that Mountainsea had a very special identity. Klandor and Norland had never shared a good relationship, so this visit would definitely not be peaceful. It was quite likely that many barbarian warriors would be challenging him on the way. If there was a chance, they definitely wouldn't mind eliminating him.

While Richard was lost in his own world, a few knocks sounded on the door before the steward made his way in. The old man was startled by what he saw, actually growing absent-minded for a moment.

Richard astutely caught the peculiarity in the man's gaze. It was the same expression Lina had shown him just before he returned. "What's wrong?" he asked.

The butler worked hard to keep his gaze off Richard as he answered, "The Church of the Eternal Dragon sent word that the ceremony will be early in the morning tomorrow. It begins at ten, but high priestess Ferlyn hopes you could head there a little earlier. She wishes to talk with you in private."

"I understand," Richard nodded, "Also, why did you look so surprised when you saw me just now?"

Seeing that he could not get out of the situation, the steward answered truthfully, "You looked extremely similar to Master Gaton just now, Young Master."

Richard froze.

He had never expected this answer, the moment filling his mind with gloom. He silently waved the old man away, leaning onto the desk as he picked up his cup once more. Only then did he remember that sitting at the edge of the table like this was a common sight with Gaton. However, the steward definitely wouldn't say he looked similar if it was just the position.

He was similar to that man? DAMN IT! Richard cursed in his mind, lifting the cup and swallowing all the alcohol in one go. The stream of fire burnt his throat all the way to the heart. That wretched man had fallen to such a childish scheme and gotten himself trapped on another plane! How were they similar?!

A blazing tipsiness surged through him, devouring his sobriety in one go. He felt himself go limp and slowly fall, a hazy thought that pampering himself once in a while was pretty good the last thing before he lost consciousness.

He did not understand how he had returned to his room, or how he was lying on the bed. When the magic alarm woke him from his dreams, it was already the next morning.

Richard felt his head hurting so badly it was about to explode. He had never gotten so drunk before, and although it was uncomfortable the soaring mood was actually quite good.

A warm towel was passed over at that moment. Richard took it and wiped his face vigorously, feeling somewhat better. A moment later, a pair of soft arms helped him sit up. Richard composed himself, turning around to find the person helping him was actually Coco.

The girl still looked as delicate as always. She cowered slightly the moment she met his gaze.

“Why are you here?” Richard frowned, his voice chilly.

Coco subconsciously shrank back, “You were drunk. The steward had me come to take care of you.”

## Book 3, Chapter 58 - Never Alone

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Richard was confused upon hearing this. Didn't the old steward not know about the relationship between Erwin and Coco? But that was impossible. This girl had met Erwin in secret before, and it was the steward himself who had told him about it.

He stood up, and Coco immediately brought him fresh clothes. He looked at her as he dressed, asking casually, "You don't hate me?"

"Of course not."

Richard hummed and sneered, "I had your lover castrate himself in front of you; you fainted then and there! You don't hate me? What rubbish!"

Coco hung her head down and replied quietly, "No, that's not it. I was surprised, because... I'd never seen anything so bloody."

"An Archeron scared of seeing blood?"

Coco went quiet, on the verge of tearing up. Still, she gritted her teeth and refused to cry, "My Archeron bloodline is very thin, to the point you can say I don't have it. I know I shouldn't be on this island, but... I have no choice. Erwin doesn't even share the family name!"

'You were calling yourselves Archerons when robbing us,' Richard had wanted to say, but looking at her ready to weep he skipped the sarcasm. "You should know Erwin will die as long as he serves me," he said indifferently, "it's just that I don't want him to die too early. The longer he takes to die, the more torture he will endure. Conversely, the better off his family will be. If you wish to use yourself for his freedom, it's best you don't speak; that will only enrage me. The consequences of my anger are dire."

Coco's head was practically buried into her chest at this point, her voice a mere whisper, "It's not for him, I mean it! I admit I did

like him, but... Whatever happened was completely out of my expectations. I never thought he would do something like that. But I didn't betray you! Really... At least, not with my body."

"So you like me?" Richard sneered at her slightly.

Coco went quiet for a while, but eventually she chose to speak the truth. She knew that she wasn't smart, so this would likely not be the most stupid choice, "No, that isn't true either. I... I hope you can forgive me. I'll work hard to do whatever you want from me."

Richard headed for the mirror, beginning to tidy up, "You hope I can forgive you? There's no need for that; you've done nothing that needs my forgiveness."

However, Richard's calmness only amplified the girl's fear. Seeing him done fixing his clothes, she hastily held onto him, "No, I beg you, don't do this! The more you say that the more afraid I get. I know you're going to leave again, please, can you tell me what I need to do when you're gone? If you don't tell me, I... I'll be terrified every day."

Every word coming from this girl's mouth was the truth. Richard's heart lurched involuntarily, and he turned to look over her quietly. This was a little white flower, a common sight anywhere. 'Encourage truth amongst those next to you,' he remembered an old saying as he hesitated.

"Coco..." he finally spoke up, "If you wish for my forgiveness, it will be both simple and difficult. You only have to do one thing—make me believe you've truly fallen in love with me."

"This... alright, I'll work hard." Coco knew her acting was not the best. However, since this was a request from Richard himself she felt much more assured regardless of the difficulty.

Richard walked to the bookshelf and picked out a book, passing it to Coco, "Here's some help. The words on the title page will let you understand me better."

Coco only looked at the tome once Richard left. It was Tales of the Great Charles, a biography of the founding emperor of the Sacred Alliance. The focus of the book was obviously on how he led millions of soldiers into the abyss, returning with dragon Daramore's head. Even she had heard these stories before.

She opened the book and flipped to the title page. The words printed there were the same words the Emperor had spoken while stepping on the abyssal dragon's head.

Those who obey me, prosper. Those who oppose me, die.

.....

When Richard reached the Church of the Eternal Dragon, it wasn't yet eight. He sent word of his arrival and a beautiful cleric came out to welcome him, guiding him to a quiet meditation room at the back of the church. High Priestess Ferlyn entered right after.

He stood up, bowing respectfully, "Esteemed High Priestess, may I know what instructions you have for me? As long as I am capable of it, I will do my best."

Richard held true admiration for Ferlyn. She always dressed plainly, looking beautiful but not stunning. And yet, the light, ethereal aura she radiated was something nobody could emulate. As long as one was by her side, they would be affected by this aura, keeping their minds content and empty.

Just as he had returned to Norland, he had been met with the crisis of Gaton being trapped in another plane. If not for the Church being willing to protect him, he had no idea how he would have dealt with this matter. The fear of Sharon might have been able to save his life, but that was the extent of it. He would not be able to protect the Archerons in Faust, perhaps not even the lives of his own siblings. It was a common sight for powerful enemies to annihilate the roots of the families they killed.

Be it Ferdinand, Jacqueline, or Noelene, their decisions would



definitely require permission from Ferlyn first and foremost.

The high priestess sat down opposite him, gesturing for him to do the same. Her voice was sweet and gentle, as calm and distant as ever, “Richard, I already looked through the offering you sent and can confirm that it is the head of an astral beast. While not yet an adult, its value is difficult to estimate. In terms of time, it can give you somewhere around fifty years of extra life.”

Richard’s breathing grew hurried. This was fifty years of life, a temptation that nobody could resist. How many things could be accomplished in fifty years? Even on an incomparably expansive primary plane, fifty years was enough to establish the foundations of a huge empire.

Time was the basis of limitless hope and possibilities.

“This is a tremendous amount of grace,” Ferlyn continued, “The time right now is critical, and the situation in Faust can change at any moment. The allocation of this grace is very important. What are your plans?”

Richard had long since considered this question, “My first choice is obviously to register Faelor with the Eternal Dragon and strengthen the passage.”

Ferlyn nodded in praise. This was a very sensible choice: an upgraded passage would be more stable and have a higher capacity. Put in simple terms, more people and items could be teleported for a lesser cost.

Ten years’ worth of divine grace would drop the cost of teleporting a fully armed rune knight to 30,000 coins while further reducing the cost of magic items. Another ten years would drop that to 20,000, a higher standard than the planes Gaton already possessed. Of course, that was outside of the Forest Plane which the Schumpeters had controlled for a long time. The passage there had already been upgraded a number of times, so even an unfixed portal would only be about 10,000 coins’ worth of magic crystals

per person.

As for the Rosie Plane, things were entirely different. The Mensas had operated in this plane that was originally named Ricarweiz for centuries, establishing an empire that occupied most of the plane. They had performed a great ceremony for the thousandth year, changing the name to Rosie. With centuries of constant offerings, the passage had grown extremely powerful. Before all the issues with the plane, the cost of teleporting a level 10 warrior was a mere 200 coins.

However, Gaton's army which was tens of thousands strong cost nearly ten million gold! He had gone all out for this, leaving no room for failure. In fact, most of the costs had come out of Sharon's pocket.

As long as the legendary mage was around, Gaton had no need to worry about the costs of the war. Gaton only needed to focus on killing without restraint. If the Mensa Family's territories could be burnt up and looted, she would treat the money she spent on the war as something she had never earned.

Nobody knew that the Sharon who had instructed Gaton in the art of war wasn't the one that was always gnashing her teeth adorably. She had spoken calmly and with clarity, helping him understand her lessons clearly.

When Ferlyn asked for the rest, Richard had no idea. The blessings one would get from offerings mostly depended on luck, so any plans were pointless. Only things like registering planes and strengthening passageways would appear easily if necessary.

"I suggest you allocate twenty years of grace to upgrading the passage," Ferlyn said gently, "Outside of that, I hope for you to allocate some to Flowsand for her own use. The girl is in urgent need of grace right now, but even officiating this ceremony won't be enough."

"Flowsand needs divine grace?" Richard confirmed.

“Yes.”

Richard grew silent, but his mind had immediately grown chaotic. While he had no idea why Flowsand would need divine grace, if Ferlyn brought this up herself then it was definitely no small matter.

Richard knew Flowsand very well; he knew the girl was actually extremely stubborn. If Ferlyn was here asking him to allocate some grace to her, then she definitely had no idea about this.

‘But... Why didn’t you just tell me you needed grace?’ he wondered quietly.

Ferlyn waited patiently, but a hint of nervousness appeared in her expression. Asking a noble for grace was more difficult than requesting a great amount of gold. They would throw away gold without a care for the friendship of a high priestess, but they definitely wouldn’t give up divine grace of similar value. While offerings could easily be turned to gold, gold could not be exchanged for an offering of equal value whenever one wanted.

It took a while for Richard to speak up, “You need not worry, High Priestess. I will allocate the divine grace to Flowsand.”

Ferlyn heaved an obvious sigh of relief and couldn’t help asking, “How much?”

She regretted the question the moment she asked it. However, Richard didn’t need to think about it for a single moment, “Everything!”

## Book 3, Chapter 59 - A Horrifying List

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“Everything?” Ferlyn’s face changed. This was thirty years of divine grace! She had seen many people with a foot in their coffin move against their loved ones for a mere year or two. At the brink of death, even a single Dewdrop of Life was undoubtedly precious.

“But can I do it? What if there isn’t any such option?” Richard asked with concern. The randomness of the gifts was a standard of the Eternal Dragon.

“Don’t worry, it will be there. I’ve officiated so many ceremonies in my life, I have the authority to allow it.” Ferlyn was evidently elated, ending her sentence with a wink as she seemed to have something up her sleeves.

“Then I’ll be waiting,” Richard said, leaving for the hall where the ritual was slated to take place.

Back in the meditation room, Ferlyn conjured a pale gold hourglass. A gentle knock transmitted a soundless wave a far distance away, and after a short while Flowsand entered the room, “You called me?”

“Have a seat. There’s still some time before the ritual begins,” Ferlyn directed Flowsand to the seat that was still warm from Richard. Her joy from the conversation with Richard withered away, replaced by a strict formality, “Flowsand. Quit while you still can.”

“I’ve made my decision,” Flowsand replied calmly.

“Is there any need for that? Your soul already belongs to the old dragon. If you choose to leave the Church this time for Faelor, you will have to give up a large amount of divine grace. Do you even have enough to spare?” The high priestess was stern.

“I can borrow.”

Ferlyn’s brows furrowed as she started radiating a murderous

aura, perhaps annoyed by Flowsand's overly calm tone. "You're already knee-deep in debt! What more can you offer as collateral? Let me tell you this, if you borrow any more, you won't be able to repay it for the rest of your lifetime! Do you know how much interest the Dragon charges? It's nearly thrice the amount you borrow! Didn't you want to be with Richard? If you keep acting recklessly like this, you two won't end up happy."

Flowsand's expression wavered. Evidently, Ferlyn had exposed her concerns. She sighed lightly, going on to answer, "I know, but... I have this feeling that if I don't go with him this time, he won't make it back in one piece. Faelor is a plane with legendary beings..."

Ferlyn conceded silently, gently commenting, "Since you've made up your mind, I will give you one last piece of advice. Choose to ignore it, and even if you go to Faelor this time Richard might still lay there forever."

Flowsand's heart wavered, and she began to listen intently. Given her position in the Church of the Eternal Dragon, Ferlyn could see into the future. Of course, exercising that power would result in dire consequences.

The high priestess heaved a large sigh, her words now tinted by a holy aura, "Firstly, you need to let Richard make his own decisions. You are not to use your precognition to help him; that will only bring him harm. You must know: the flow of time cannot be changed by one or two changes to one's actions. Whatever is bound to happen will happen. You need to accept him making his own decisions, this current ceremony being the start."

Flowsand nodded earnestly, showing her understanding.

Ferlyn continued, "The second is a somewhat trivial matter. You were talking about Richard's issues with confidence, so I've found a solution to that. I haven't actually seen any lack of confidence from him over our interactions, however..."

Flowsand laughed gently: “His overconfidence is just a front for his lack of confidence!”

“Very well. Once the ritual ends, hand these things over to him.”

Ferlyn passed her three palm-sized crystal plates, every one lustrous. The right side up held the crest of the Eternal Dragon, and the other Ferlyn’s personal sigil. These plates possessed the power of time, manifested as a bunch of grains of golden sand flying around them.

Even Flowsand could not tell the purpose of these plates, so she asked about their powers.

“Magic artefacts. Tell Richard to have them on his person at all times; if he ever faces a problem he cannot solve, he can break one. These plates can save him thrice,” Ferlyn said flatly.

Flowsand’s expression warped into one of disbelief, her eyes unblinking as they focused on Ferlyn. She couldn’t bring herself to believe the woman’s words; how could such a thing even exist in the world? This far surpassed the ability of a mere magic artefact. Even a divine tool couldn’t possibly solve any problem in the world.

Leave alone Ferlyn’s personal collection, even blessings from the Eternal Dragon with such a function were extremely rare. A blessing that could predict the future was harder to find than an extension to one’s life. Besides, even prophetic blessings didn’t have the power that Ferlyn claimed these plates did. They were undoubtedly a miracle.

She tried to hold back as much as she could, but she couldn’t help but subtly ask the high priestess, “Richard has a very inquisitive mind. He’ll definitely break at least two of the plates before we head over to Faelor to test their power.”

“That I know!” Ferlyn replied.

Flowsand felt extremely confused, but the bells of the Church

sounded to mark the time for the ceremony. She had to rush over to officiate, so she helplessly accepted the plates and decided to do as Ferlyn said. The high priestess had no reason to even exaggerate, much less fool them.

.....

With this being the second ritual they had conducted, Richard was already very familiar with the procedures.

This time around, it wasn't Ferlyn who accompanied him to the ruin-like altar but Flowsand. Richard was carrying the giant astral beast skull on his back, a feat that required a Bull's Strength spell, a divine spell, and Eruption working in tandem to accomplish.

The ritual began with the same, familiar chant dedicated to the highest level of ceremony. The power of time radiated from Flowsand's body without interruption, turning into threads of pale gold light that activated the altar. A curtain of timeforce rose once more, isolating Richard from Flowsand.

Within this curtain was a realm completely isolated from spacetime, intended to prevent the interruption of any outside forces, not even the officials of the Church. The essence of the astral beast skull was extracted from the altar, transformed into the power of time before assimilating into the void.

"Mortal, before you lay the divine blessings you wish for. Make your decision!" a sacred, robotic voice bellowed in the empty space, a representative of the Eternal Dragon.

A large sphere of the power of time had conglomerated in front of Richard, the image of a large door appearing within. As he was about to touch it, a message appeared in front of him.

Divine Blessing: Unhurried Travels. Upgrade a planar passage to a designated rank.

Richard immediately chose Faelor, allocating about twenty years' worth of grace before carving the serial number of the plane onto

one of the pillars of time.

This left him with just over half the amount of divine grace as well as a host of new options. To Richard's surprise, in front of him were two full pages with close to a hundred options for his blessings. This was completely different from his last experience.

Richard immediately decided to browse through all the possible options and scrutinise them down to the very details, afraid that he would overlook the option Ferlyn had told him would allow him to allocate the grace to Flowsand.

However, the very first blessing almost caused him to lose his mind.

Divine Blessing: Ability Bestowal. You may learn skills related to your innate abilities, attaining mastery over them akin to someone with your skills who studied them over ten years of work. The amount of knowledge you shall absorb is limited by your intellect. This blessing can be chosen multiple times.

What truly shocked him were the options under the blessing:

Scarlet Knight rune set (a random two out of six runes).

Mystic's Set (a random three out of five runes).

Heaven's Armour rune set (any one of five runes).

Sleipnir's Foot (from the Prisonblaze Warlord set).

Entanglement (from the Twisted Dream set).

The blessing could be obtained with only fifteen years' worth of divine grace! In other words, the remaining thirty years Richard had would allow him to learn the famous Mystic's Set! Even though he currently lacked the power to use that knowledge, once he advanced in level he would immediately be able to craft any of the runes in this set!

If he missed this opportunity, he would likely have to wait for aeons before such an option came across him once more. The



chances that he would even see it again were less than one in a million! As someone with a strong foundation in mathematics, Richard clearly knew what this meant.

It was a test of his tenacity to even look at the second option. However, as he tried to do so, a voice sounded incessantly within his heart, 'If you learn more runes, you can grow stronger much more quickly. That will allow you to give more divine grace to Flowsand in the future! Isn't that a better ending? This is a small decision, but think about it, the complete Mystic's Set! You could even learn four of the Scarlet Knight runes, you just have to add in the last two sometime later! It's a very simple decision to make...'

He didn't know how he managed to ignore that voice, looking at the second option instead. However, it still took him quite a long time to bring himself away from Ability Bestowal and actually read what the next option was.

# Book 3, Chapter 60 - Lie

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The second option left Richard seeing black.

Divine Blessing: Awaken Bloodline. The power of time shall cleanse your body, developing your hidden bloodline powers to the fullest. You may choose one of these abilities:

Conflagration (Archeron bloodline. Upgraded version of Blaze. Increases spellcasting speed by upto 50%).

Empowered Beckon (Elven bloodline. Increases nature affinity when casting summoning spells, upgrading the creature type by one grade and the count by three).

Endless Vitality (Elven bloodline. Doubles energy and mana recovery rate).

Celestial Rain (Elven bloodline, astral powers. Doubles the effect of the Deepblue meditation techniques).

Richard couldn't bear to look further. He originally didn't know what powers his bloodlines could potentially unlock, so the most he did was to adjust the growth of his bloodlines to maximise their potential. In other words, there were trade-offs he had to maintain. Now, however, this blessing would give him the prerogative to make his own decisions. He instantly thought up dozens of combinations that would maximise his bloodline power.

He almost had to block off his blessing of wisdom. Ahead of him right now were various extremely powerful abilities, the pinnacle of both his bloodlines. Take Empowered Beckon, for example. It was only slightly weaker than Sharon's Master Summoner ability, the power of a legendary bloodline!

'Second only to Sharon...' This was an appraisal that definitely made Richard proud of his bloodlines. There was even greater reason for joy: although his bloodline powers didn't have any set date when they would awaken before, he held such a boost to his

power in his fingertips.

A simple decision would give him great power. Who was he to say no to such an offer?

Richard took in a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. How could this be? Why were there so many options laid ahead of him, the choices giving him such great power? He simply had no reason to reject these things! He was still human, a mortal of flesh and blood. These blessings were almost impossible to resist.

He voided himself of all emotion, mechanically shifting his gaze to the third option. This time, he was no longer shocked, merely consuming the information as if he had grown numb to everything on offer.

Divine Blessing: Enlightenment. You shall be granted a third bloodline, chosen randomly from the following options: dragon, behemoth, unicorn, planar wanderer, astral beast.

Divine Blessing: Mystical Transformation. Your mana will be enhanced by one of the following elements: astral power, moonforce, timeforce...

Richard stopped before looking at the fifth option, instead shutting his eyes and beginning to ponder. If that man were facing this situation, how would he likely react?

He suddenly opened his eyes, jerking upright before screaming, "Does he truly think this bullshit will captivate me? It takes more than that!"

Due to his elven bloodline and the patience he had cultivated over many years, Richard was normally always calm and composed. Growing so agitated as to spew enraged curses did not match his typical image at all. Even more intriguing was the fact that he suddenly felt a lot more relaxed after the outburst, the attraction of the various blessings seemingly fading away.

There were thousands upon thousands of routes towards the

peak. Why should he have to depend on the charity of others?

In that moment of standing up, Richard felt like he understood half of Gaton's domineering nature. He continued to read the various options for blessings, but this time it was with ease and no emotional burden upon himself. He treated it as simply broadening his horizons; after all, this list of blessings would also provide insight into his own potential.

With this change in perspective, Richard suddenly found his worldview a lot wider. He realised that reading the contents of these blessings was in itself a useful endeavour; he did not need to possess them to obtain their benefits. These numerous options were actually pointing him in the correct direction to advance his path.

After going through 120 options, his eyes suddenly gleamed as he focused on a particular one. Divine Blessing: Distribute Grace. Allocate some of your divine grace to a target of your choice.

This was also the last option. As such, Richard reached for it without hesitation and allocated all his remaining grace to Flowsand, upholding his promise to Ferlyn.

He hadn't yet realised that he had willingly sacrificed his own power for Flowsand.

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Outside the isolated space, Flowsand had grown extremely shocked as the ritual unfolded. The ceremony typically ended much earlier than this, and there were no traces of the descent of the Eternal Dragon either. However, in that instant, a golden ray of light fell into the hall and spilled over her body. She was taken aback, finding enormous amounts of divine grace entering her!

'What's going on? Why is this coming to me?' Flowsand was extremely perplexed. A quick calculation told her that this was three-fifths of the total divine grace from the astral beast's skull. In

other words, outside of the grace used to strengthen the planar passage, Richard had allocated everything else to her.

‘Why would he share his grace with me, and so much at that? Could it be... Did he find out about it?’ The cleric was starting to grow anxious, but she quickly denied that thought. This was a secret known to only the titled individuals in the Church of the Eternal Dragon. The old dragon himself had decreed that nobody else could know. Everything followed the principle of equal exchange: a title came with a dear price.

It didn’t take long after that for the curtain of timeforce to disappear. Richard emerged from within, a faint smile on his face. Flowsand was suddenly left in a trance. The Richard ahead of her now appeared to be slightly different, but she could not put a word to it.

She walked forward to talk to him, asking in a hurry, “Why would you allocate so much grace to me? You should prioritise your own abilities! If you’re always so reckless, how can you lead us to conquer many planes? I’m still counting on you to perform more ceremonies for me to get grace from!” By the end, her rant had taken on a lecturing tone.

Richard shrugged, “Can’t be helped, it was the only option. What else could I have done?”

“Only option? And it was to give your grace away? HOW COULD THAT BE?!” Flowsand was growing agitated. She knew from experience that such a thing was impossible.

“That’s right, I was left with no choice!” Richard put on an innocent expression. ‘What can I do now?’ it seemed to say, ‘I can’t take back what I’ve given.’

Flowsand continued staring at Richard, seeing something in his eyes. Tears welled up in her own, almost flowing freely down her face. “You’ve learnt to lie.”

“Really? How come I didn’t know that?” Richard beamed, no shadows in his smile.

## Book 3, Chapter 61 - Destiny Crystals

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Once the ceremony came to an end, Richard reaped his own reward: the three crystal plates. Flowsand told him these three crystals had great power; every one he broke could solve any difficult problem he was facing.

Any problem you're facing can be solved easily... Flowsand's explanation had made it seem like these plates were equivalent to additional lives. "You silly girl!" he had exclaimed in disbelief as he took them, "When did you learn to talk so big?"

He naturally sensed the prophetic powers within the plates when he took them from her hands. The issue was with prophecy magic itself.

Prophecies were a branch of magic that left people both curious and helpless. The curious bit was the fact that enough mana would give a mage basically limitless prophetic abilities, but of course what exactly was "enough" was something that could drive anyone crazy.

In theory, a legendary mage could use prophecy magic to interfere in another's life. For example, they could cause an ordinary human to trip and hurt themselves badly. However, that was it. There was a series of harsh conditions if one wanted to kill with this magic, and the problem was only amplified as the other party grew stronger. If the deviation from one's prophecy was large enough, they could even tip the compass of fate in the other direction. It didn't compare in any way to just throwing a fireball to kill a group of people.

These plates were supposed to be able to solve any problem? They were additional lives? Even the legendary destiny crystal used in the protective sphere did not have such great power. These crude plates were definitely unlikely to be able to accomplish such a thing.

Flowsand grew fierce upon seeing his expression, “You don’t believe me?”

“Of course I do,” Richard grinned. His smile was now filled with limitless vitality.

“If you don’t believe me, I don’t mind if you test it out,” she said between clenched teeth. In actual fact, she was in the same camp as him. However, she couldn’t tell Richard that outright, at best throwing a few hints his way.

Richard placed the crystal plates in his pocket and squeezed Flowsand’s little face so hard she started to grimace, saying with a smile, “Use the grace wisely, it came in exchange for the thing Master gave me. Be careful, Master is very petty, she’ll come looking for interest.”

Flowsand merely let out a snort.

Richard looked at the time, “Get ready, we’ll be heading out in two days. For now, I have to go back.”

Once Richard was sent off, the offering hall grew empty and desolate. Flowsand sighed and sat down on a rock beside the altar, placing her right hand before her eye. 31 small hourglasses formed in the palm of her hand, each hourglass representing an additional year of life. This was the divine grace Flowsand currently possessed. The ability to stockpile it was a special privilege granted only to title holders.

Looking at them all, Flowsand sighed and thought to herself, ‘Richard is so foolish. Could it be that he really couldn’t tell what this grace could be exchanged for? Hmph, that cannot be the case! But...’

Behind the gruffness lay a soft, delicate mind.

“I guess it’s time to return some debts.” Flowsand raised her hand lazily, the hourglasses in her palm slowly disappeared one after the other until only half were left. The rest of the grace would



be used to upgrade her powers.

The more sacrifices one offered, the stronger one grew. The stronger one grew, the more sacrifices they could offer. Such were the rules of the Eternal Dragon. There was only one constant in the path to success— sacrifice.

Flowsand thought over it for a long time before finally waving her hand, sending all the remaining divine grace out. A handsome youth suddenly appeared out of thin air, bending down on one knee and saying with a melodious voice, “Esteemed Priestess, thank you for granting me the chance to awake. I shall repay your grace for the rest of my life! Please, decide my path.”

Flowsand thought over it long and hard. This was a very difficult question to answer, a question of choosing between battle and divinity. She could choose to push the heavenly guardian towards attack or defence, although a balance would be optimal. He could be granted magical powers, something that only served to complicate the matter. When all the choices were put before her, they led to numerous branches that were all different. Every guardian in the Church’s history had been a different existence.

In the end, she decided that she would push him towards one end. Be it battle power or priesthood, a gifted commander like Richard could make use of an extreme much better than a jack of all trades.

Flowsand felt something softly tugging at her heartstrings, “You will take the path of a battle priest.”

The river of time in the void shot out threads of timeforce that entered the heavenly guardian’s body. The raw strength in his aura dropped a little, exchanged for a tint of holiness. He stood up, “Esteemed Priestess, the river of time has bestowed a name upon me. I am Io.”

Flowsand still had some divine grace on hand, so she formed a Waterdrop Necklace and wore it. “Follow me, I’ll get you the

equipment for a battle priest,” she said to Io. Priests always came first in planar war.

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Island 7-2 had grown a lot livelier in recent times as envoys of different families came and left. The griffin stands were already at capacity, every platform cramped with two.

When Richard returned to the castle, he saw two carpenters from the royal household busy at work carving scabbards for his sword and dagger. The elven sword Gaton had given him had no enchantments and the blade was too long, but since this was the only present that man had ever given him Richard decided to carry it along. Of course, he told himself that it was because this sword was the best weapon when using the secret swords of Silvermoon, and when it came to war comfort wasn't important.

That reason was a little inane. Comfort may not be important in battle, but handiness was.

Seeing Richard's return, the old steward who was discussing something with a few people suddenly hurried over, “Young Master, these people were sent by the royal family. They have brought over the materials you need, you can check them now.”

“Materials?” Richard was overjoyed, immediately making his way to the table nearby and inspecting everything.

Upon the table was a large magic box the size of a luggage bag, neatly separated into more than a hundred small compartments. Each compartment held its own unique properties for the materials it could store. More than half the compartments were currently filled with materials, ten of which were very rare resources that couldn't easily be bought with gold. The only way to grow this collection would be to spend time collecting.

The items in the luggage bag alone were worth more than a million gold coins. With these materials on hand, it would be no

issue for Richard to craft standard grade 3 runes. That was the most valuable thing.

A mage nearby spoke up, “Lord Richard, these materials are part of your payment for the runes you shall be crafting this year. The rest is being paid in gold alongside your annual salary, for a total of 1,500,000. Please check through this and acknowledge.”

Needless to say, the mage didn’t actually hand over 1.5 million gold coins; even a Deepblue mage would be crushed under that weight. It was instead a palm-sized box with fifteen magic crystals neatly lined up within, each worth about 100,000 gold. This was the true currency of the upper class.

Richard signed for the materials and crystals, sending the envoys of the royal family away. He thought about it for a while before passing five of the crystals to the old steward, “This is for the island’s operational expenses this year. Any excess you can use to increase the salary of the soldiers loyal to the family. Also, find some youths with potential and train them; the internal riots killed off many of our young warriors.”

When he walked into Gaton’s study, Fuschia was already waiting for him. She passed Richard a list of the people she had picked out to follow him to Faelor, everyone at least level 10, loyal, and with the potential to advance in the future. Ten people were selected in the list alongside twenty reserves, a mix of footsoldiers and Archeron warriors. Richard was surprised that there were only two free Archerons on the list.

“The Archeron warriors are unwilling to go to Faelor?” Richard asked.

Fuschia shrugged, “They prefer a carefree life. Now that the crisis on the island has been resolved, they want to explore and fight elsewhere. Besides, even though some of these people have the level, they don’t have potential. There is limited space on the expedition, it would be a waste to bring them along.”

She was right. Even with two upgrades, it still cost 20,000 gold to transport one warrior through the portal. Such a fee could instead be used to hire a team of soldiers in Faelor... Richard started muttering to himself; this was a problem which every commander in a planar war faced.

“Oh yes, there is another issue!” Fuschia said in an exaggerated tone, “Dear Young Master Richard, did you not say you want to become allies with my Lady, going so far as to become partners with her? You are about to enter an alien plane, no one knows when you’ll be back. As a sign of your sincerity, should you not place a deposit? For example, the two rune sets you displayed in the convention. We can get the knights and mounts ourselves.”

Richard grew annoyed.

His relationship with Alice was a difficult problem that had to be handled carefully. She was rising to power far too quickly, only suppressed so far by Gaton’s existence. Even so, she had still managed to shine in Gaton’s shadow. She was far more important than Goliath or even Sauron. With her talents, she would soon become someone who could change the tides of battle. There were only two reasons she was still an Earl: her tender age, and the Archeron emphasis on individual glory. Stronger Archerons would isolate themselves from the rest of the family.

## Book 3, Chapter 62 - Destiny Crystals(2)

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However, Richard had only met Alice once, and barely spoken to her— he didn't understand her in the slightest. He didn't know how to start the simplest of alliances, forget an agreement to become partners. Fuschia's stance was unpredictable as well; sometimes she was suddenly respectful, and at other times she would play around. It made it difficult for him to make sense of the Earl's intentions.

In the midst of figuring this out, Richard suddenly felt the three crystal plates in his pocket pressing up uncomfortably against his body. Flowsand's words came to mind, reminding him that these plates were supposed to be able to resolve all his difficulties. If that was the case, would this small matter not be trifling to fix?

He thus reached into his pocket, calmly crushing one of the plates into pieces. The crystal fragments immediately transformed into pure energy, flowing into him through his fingertips. A voice rang out in his mind, 'Alice is a natural ally, an unrivalled partner whom you cannot afford to ignore. However, you are the same to her.'

He was instantly shocked. No matter how powerful prophetic magic could get, it should never have such an effect! This was already beyond the domain of normal magic, the ability to grasp another's mind and soul. The words themselves wouldn't be unusual if someone knowledgeable like Gaton spoke them, but formed from the crystal plate's energy they were astonishing.

Even with his profound knowledge, he did not have any idea of spells that had such a miraculous effect. As far as he knew, there was practically no magic that could achieve this.

The words may have been simple, but their importance could not be underestimated. People often merely needed an indication of direction when trapped in difficult circumstances. Richard was

now sure of how to handle his relationship with Alice; being partners was only a bonus, the most valuable aspect was a secure alliance.

In the midst of all this shock, Richard's hand trembled in his pocket and accidentally crushed another of the crystals!

The voice rang out in his mind once more, 'Rune knights are a foundation to all battles. However, they are a double-edged sword that could come back to hurt you. The most important attribute of a rune knight is not potential, it is loyalty. Take more knights along to Faelor, if only as porters.'

Richard was shocked greatly once more.

This advice was just as significant as the last. Not only would it help determine his choices in going to Faelor this time, it was also a principle that he could apply in the future.

Runes were a precious few, outnumbered by rune knight candidates thousands to one. Any decently able level 11 warrior with the carrying capacity could become a rune knight. As for the upper bound, level 15 and level 17 weren't all that different to Richard right now. What he needed was a core army that was absolutely loyal, not young talents like Erwin who could betray him at any time. Besides, potential was only useful if one could survive long enough to take control of their lives.

These two crystals had completely settled Richard's most pressing problems. His hand trembled a little once more, coming into contact with the third. He was immediately startled, pulling his hand from his pocket as though he had just touched fire in the fear of crushing the third as well.

These plates were indeed miraculous, just like Flowsand had said. With two already used up, he had to keep the third safe no matter what. If he was caught in a deadlock in the future, it would be the saving grace that rescued him! Although Flowsand had played it down when she gave him the plates, that did not mean they

weren't rare or precious. One could not obtain these sorts of things endlessly. Perhaps these three plates were the only ones he would ever come across.

He carefully retrieved the last plate from his pocket, covering it with a handkerchief woven from antimagic cloth before placing it snugly against his body. Noticing his curious behaviour, Fuschia couldn't help but ask, "What amazing thing is that?"

Richard decided to tell the truth, "A protective charm that can see into the future. It's very precious, with the power to change one's destiny when crushed in times of need."

Fuschia scoffed lightly upon seeing the solemn look on Richard's face, believing something like that could never exist. Such charms would have saved many noble figures from their deaths. She simply took Richard's words as a joke, meant to stall for time as he carefully deliberated over his decision.

This was a common tactic many nobles used during negotiations. Fuschia wasn't so anxious for the answer that she couldn't even wait a few minutes. Richard's current predicament didn't leave him with too many choices, so she was confident she could fight for her Lady's welfare. In her eyes, Earl Alice's minimal standards had been a little too low.

Of course, this was precisely the effect that Richard wanted to achieve. He knew that Fuschia wouldn't believe him even if he told the truth. After all, he himself had been sceptical but a few minutes ago.

Set on his decision, Richard took out the box with the remaining magic crystals and handed it to Fuschia, "This is a gift for Earl Alice. Consider it to be the down payment."

"Ten high-grade magic crystals!" Fuschia exclaimed after opening the box, "How generous. But still, it seems a little inadequate. This is only sufficient for a single grade 2 rune knight."

“This is already sincere enough,” Richard stated.

“But we asked for grade 2 rune knights. Of course, set knights would be best—”

Richard raised his hand and interrupted Fuschia’s words, “My time is precious and limited, there’s no need to waste it haggling. This is my bottom line. Whether Alice accepts it or not is up to her, not you! Of course, if the Lady allowed you to bargain on her behalf and you feel like it’s not enough, then the agreement ends here. Take the crystals anyway, consider it my thanks for keeping my siblings safe all this while.”

Fuschia sighed, reluctantly stowing the box of magic crystals away. “Pettiness is unbecoming of a man,” she remarked.

“It’s worse to be extravagant beyond one’s means,” Richard countered with a smile.

She huffed in reply, “My Lady is surely worth more than just twenty grade 2 rune knights!”

Richard nodded in reply, “I suppose she has more hopes for her ally to grow formidable rapidly.”

“Her partner,” Fuschia corrected.

“Right, partner. That’s certainly even better. Alright, let’s take a look at the people you selected. I think I should bring more people to Faelor, the ones on the list aren’t exactly enough on their own.”

“Suit yourself. But don’t forget, you need 20,000 gold to transport one person to Faelor,” she reminded him. She had already been informed about the upgrades to the passage.

“It’s worth the money,” Richard answered.



## Book 3, Chapter 63 - Behind The Scenes

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All the free Archeron warriors and the knights in training were quickly gathered in one of the training fields. There were over 300 people for Richard to choose from, and as usual, he walked to each of them to ask about their skills, family, and unique traits.

The process took more than an hour, leaving the spectating Fuschia the same as Nyris and Agamemnon when they first saw his incomparable patience and meticulousness.

He wound up picking 26 candidates, 17 of which were Archeron warriors. All of them had at least four rune slots as necessary for a rune knight, but they weren't the most talented group. Half of them were limited to level 15; even in the best case, they would only end up as elite rune knights that could compare to a normal saint.

However, that was what made them suitable to be the core of an army. Any more powerful and they would grow difficult to command, just like Gaton's thirteen.

Richard had the old steward equip all these soldiers with the spare equipment in the family warehouse. With another day left until he returned to Faelor, the family craftsmen would be able to make any adjustments needed as long as they worked a little more than normal. When he returned to Gaton's study once more, he had finally dealt with every pressing issue.

He took out a piece of magic paper, carefully writing down a list of the people and items he would be bringing alongside him as a final confirmation. Looking at the goods on the list, he already had a rough idea of the huge profits he stood to make upon his return. It almost exceeded his profits from the royal family.

One had to note that a set of materials for Savage Barrier cost less than 200,000 coins, but given that it was more powerful than a mix of grade 2 runes it sold for over a million. The royal family

would provide him with five sets of materials for every one he made, close to a million coins in materials for a single rune set. A runemaster's profit margin was defined by their success rate, and his was abnormally high. Even any runes outside of the nominal agreement the royal family would buy only slightly lower than the market price.

Richard was basically guaranteed to spend less than 200,000 coins to craft one Savage Barrier set. A royal runemaster's profits from their runes might seem lower than through auction on the surface, but the true profits came with the added status, privilege, and endless rare materials that one could not purchase on the market. Richard would make crazy profits from the royal family.

This was why he had been in such a rush to return to Norland. The true source of profit in any planar war was through trade. And he needed a lot of money to expand his power and influence as quickly as possible.

Of course, there was nothing without its cost. This return had sparked an eternal enemy in Lunor. The royal runemaster had accumulated stupendous amounts of wealth over the past decade, his numerous students giving him extensive power. Although some could be drawn away with other benefits, long-term relationships could not be shaken with money alone. He needed time to break Lunor's influence apart, the one thing he lacked the most right now.

There were far too many things to do, but the Rainbow of the Moons came and went at a constant rate.

Richard's greatest advantage was that his rate of profit was perhaps tens of times higher than Lunor's; when his power and wealth reached a tipping point, the grand runemaster would be nothing in his eyes. Not only was his success rate far higher, he also took much less time to draw a rune. According to the information Nyris had given him, Richard estimated he only took half the time to draw a grade 2 rune.

Efficiency. that was also a source of profit.

Richard was immersed in calculating the profits of the trip, figuring out how much of it could be turned into battle power and how much had to be retained for growth. Maximising one's profit in a given timespan was a complicated issue that was affected by many factors; even with his ability, Richard needed a few hours to go through everything.

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While Richard was lost in a world of calculations, Coco stood anxiously in the steward's office. The man had a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles on his face, carefully reading through a piece of paper filled with numbers. When he finished reading the last line, he inked a number on it and handed the paper to Coco.

It only took the girl a single look to realise the paper held details of her family's recent income and expenditure, as well as some other important matters. The butler had just marked the family's financial deficit. As for the major events column:

Cencil Archeron, Coco Archeron's half-brother from the same mother. Currently does not hold any position in the Archeron Family, living in his father's territory. Two months ago, he tried to woo a local farmer's daughter and ended up raping her, severely injuring the girl's parents in the process. The case is being heard in the local court.

Sir Pierre Archeron, Coco Archeron's father. Is the owner of a small fief, with a meagre income. His salary as the vice-captain of Blackrose Castle's guards is far from enough to support the luxurious light he is living right now. Even the salary of three knights combined would not be enough to make up for the losses.

The only reason Sir Pierre hadn't gone bankrupt was an allowance from the Archeron Family, specifically from Gaton. This allowance had been granted for an entire year, multiple times Pierre's normal salary. The quota had been raised again in recent

times, and a quarter's funds had been paid in advance.

This allowance was in exchange for Coco being in Faust and on the shortlist of potential partners. She barely even qualified for that position, but Pierre's many years of service had given her a leg up. After all, the Archeron Family was a collection of untameable brutes; someone willing to avoid the battlefield and take on the role of a watchman for any length of time was a rare find.

Traditionally, becoming a partner had only been an obligation for those Archerons with a strong bloodline. It was when Gaton successfully established himself on Faust and acquired a stable income from his planes that he started to increase the number of potential partners and started training so many knights.

Ever since then, the warriors training on the floating island as well as all the women that qualified to become partners were granted a quarterly allowance. The amount may not be much to a baron, but to most commoners it was a vast income. The Archerons were peasants but a few centuries ago; to them, the quarterly sum was an extravagance that would completely change their families.

Gaton thus trained a powerful force of knights, but unexpectedly many people started to send their daughters to the island in exchange for an allowance. Most branch families without a noble rank actually had very thin blood; anyone who could actually awaken a bloodline ability would be granted knighthood and their own fief. Still, Gaton encouraged this practice in the hopes of seeing more Archerons with awakened bloodlines.

On the other hand, the knight training was meant to give the young Archerons better opportunities to display their talents, at the same time securing jobs for the poorer members of the family in their later years. Most of the instructors were free warriors who were either disabled or too old to risk their lives on the battlefield.

Both of these initiatives focused on the prosperity of the entire

Archeron Family, but all of the burden fell on Gaton's shoulders. Any branch family with even the tiniest blood relation to the main line started sending their sons and daughters to the floating island for the sake of the allowance. There were so many of them that Gaton had been driven to the point where he had to set a minimum standard to screen out those who were truly unqualified.

Most of the dissent directed at him in the family meeting had come from those branches whose children had been screened out.

Even after the screening, an astonishing figure had been paid out to the various branch families in the two years since Gaton had entered Faust. It had become a heavy burden, one of the few points of dispute between him and Sharon. The legendary mage believed her money was an investment, not something for him to donate to his clansmen at will.

Coco was one of the many girls who had wound up on island 7-2 in this way. Then she was selected to be Richard's partner, directly tripling the allowance her family received. The sum of money one's family was granted was directly related to how thick their partner's blood was. With the density of Richard's bloodline, Coco's income had increased greatly.

The old steward pushed up his glasses, glancing at Coco, "Sir Pierre's expenditure has increased by 30% this quarter. Just the interest on his debts has reached 3,000 gold; at this rate, the allowance might not be enough."

Coco's anxiousness showed on her delicate face. She didn't pay attention to the allowance, instead pointing at the major events column and asking impatiently, "How is my brother now, Sir?"

"This issue is a little difficult to handle," the steward said slowly, "I've heard Mr. Cencil keeps bragging that his sister is the partner of the family's runemaster, constantly mentioning that Richard is the student Her Excellency Sharon is proudest of. And his way of doing things... Hmm, very inappropriate. He's already stirred up

public outrage.”

## Book 3, Chapter 64 - Behind The Scenes(2)

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The steward paused for a while before continuing, “This matter is very tricky. The nature of his offence is harsh, so even the local barons are applying pressure on the courts to punish Mr. Cencil severely. Based on experience, the judgement should be death by hanging.”

Coco immediately felt her vision go black, almost fainting right that instant. “Brother was the only one who truly loved me since I was young!” she pleaded the moment she came to, “Please, Sir, please think of a way to save him! I’m willing to pay any price!”

There were tears in the girl’s eyes. This was an unexpected disaster that nearly overwhelmed her.

“Do you even have anything to pay with?” the old steward asked profoundly.

Coco’s weeps slowed down, turning into sobs of despair. Indeed, it was already lenient of Richard to let her continue living her former life. Everything she had came from the Archerons, from Richard’s very existence. What was she worth herself?

The old butler sighed, “Young Master’s identity should still be able to save Mr. Cencil’s life. However, what about Young Master’s children?”

Coco absently caressed her belly, facing turning pale as she bit her lips, “But... He isn’t willing to even touch me! What can I do?”

The steward replied with an old proverb, “There are only women who cannot be conquered, what man exists that cannot be seduced?”

The girl suddenly performed a deep bow, “I understand! I will try my best, but please help my brother! It’s fine as long as he survives!”

“Time is tight,” the old steward said indifferently.

Coco understood his meaning and turned around, preparing to leave. Richard hadn't told her about his schedule, but she could see the various signs that he would depart soon. She indeed did not have much time; once Richard left, who knew when he would come back. Although it was hard to guarantee that she could conceive a child in such a short period of time, she at least had to get into his bed. If she couldn't even manage that, she would have no ground to make any kind of request.

Coco hesitated for a moment before leaving, eventually turning around and speaking in a soft voice that even she herself could barely hear, "Sir, could you also... raise the allowance for my father? Just a little bit will do."

The butler sighed, "Your family already receives thrice the allowance of a normal branch, and the sole reason for that is Young Master choosing you as his partner. I suggest you urge Sir Pierre to stop comparing luxuries with barons whose families have centuries of history. As for Mr. Cencil... There's no need to consider him for the time being."

Coco was rendered speechless, withdrawing quietly. Although her father was a two-rune knight, because he had never been to a true battlefield he remained stuck at level 10. Even inherited titles depended greatly on age and experience; if Coco and her siblings could not establish any definite achievements, they might not even be able to take over his fief.

Her father had served a dull, monotonous life in Blackrose for dozens of years. However, the knighthood was more than just recompense for his service. He had once been responsible and diligent, but as he approached the twilight of his life he was starting to indulge in a luxurious lifestyle for unknown reasons. It was as though he wanted to make up for everything he had lost in the first half of his life. That was how the pillar of their family had changed to Coco.

The girl in question quietly proceeded to Richard's bedroom in



preparation for his return. However, Richard didn't return to his room even after she fell asleep waiting. The light in Gaton's study was lit all the while.

Back in the study, Richard was finally done with the plan to maximise the coming year's profits. It was an ideal state that assumed excess supply, making it absolutely impossible to achieve, but it was meant to be a standard to compare himself to. It would allow him to judge the cost every action he took levied on his profits, what Blackgold termed opportunity cost.

Finished with an enormous amount of calculations, he felt a little tired. He sighed lightly as he rubbed his aching forehead, about to go get some rest.

However, it was at that moment that he felt a cool night breeze in the room. The door to the study was opened silently, and two figures walked in one after the other.

Only Fuschia and the old steward were allowed to enter this floor at any time, and either of them would have knocked before they entered. Richard grew absolutely rigid, not daring to make the slightest of movements as a pair of shadows appeared on the floor. An extremely threatening aura buffeted him in the face, threatening him of a violent end if he so much as twitched.

Richard felt enormous pressure the moment these two entered, as though an entire mountain range had come crashing down on his back. It made him want to activate Blaze subconsciously, but the stinging pain on his skin made him repress his bloodline. Whoever had just entered far surpassed him in power; if they wanted him dead, there would be nothing he could do to stop it.

It was at that moment that, separated by his clothes, Richard felt the existence of the crystal plate on his body. The feeling served fantastically to calm down his heart. No matter what happened, was this piece of destiny crystal not on him? Perhaps it really could reverse his fate.

He thus lifted his head and looked towards the two unfamiliar guests, a pair of man and woman.

The lady looked very young and beautiful, with short hair only an inch below her head that fluttered softly despite a lack of wind. Her eyes were glowing, to the extent that it was hard to even notice her eyeballs beyond her bottomless pupils. The gaze was extremely keen, sharper even than a sword. Richard felt his heart stop for a moment when his eyes met hers.

This was a murderous aura, an indescribably powerful killing intent! Although there was no doubt that the other party had no ill intentions towards him, he could still feel a bitter cold all around him. It was like approaching a sharp weapon that had drunk the blood of countless foes. Even though it was not pointed at oneself, one could almost feel the sharp edge piercing their skin.

Richard could scarcely imagine what kind of murderous aura one needed to freeze his heart. More importantly, what sort of experiences allowed this woman to possess it?!

Although he could tell she was roughly around level 18 at first glance, he knew by instinct that her power was inconceivable. In her case, her level meant nothing!

## Book 3, Chapter 65 - Beye

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The woman was dressed in a weird suit of armour that was littered with scratches and traces of repair. There were also large swathes of purple, marks of corrosion that from what Richard knew could only come from powerful creatures like demons. This alone was proof enough of the numerous battles she had experienced, an indication of how frightening of a character she was to walk through mountains of corpses and seas of blood.

There wasn't the slightest trace of vitality from this beauty's body. Her aura was rife with death and desolation.

The man beside her was quite tall, his entire body wrapped in a cloak to reveal only a shiny bald head. His skin was a rosy bronze, with muscles bulging out even at his neck. He was just as expressionless as the lady beside him, the corners of his lips almost pointing straight down as he stared at Richard coldly. The man's eyes were bright and almond-shaped like those of an animal, the depths of his pupils a dark red.

He seemed to be brimming with energy, already at level 19, but next to the woman he was nearly invisible. This wasn't a lack of power on his part; she was just far too overbearing, as though seizing the light of the entire world.

The two of them walked up to Richard. The woman seemed surprised that Richard could still sit straight and look at her calmly, her arrogant gaze growing a little more gentle.

The door of the study suddenly opened and Fuschia rushed in, long hair fluttering in the wake of her roused aura as she wielded a dagger in each hand. "RICHARD, ARE YOU—"

Fuschia's scream stopped instantly; the woman's gaze had fallen upon her. "Beye!" she cried out in surprise.

The woman named Beye frowned, evidently not knowing who

Fuschia was. The bald man beside her immediately leaned over and said respectfully, “Fuschia, level 19 blade dancer. Earl Alice Archeron’s right hand.”

“19... A passable level.” This was the first time Beye had spoken. Her voice was just like her aura, full of a murderous intent like the clash of countless swords.

Fuschia’s face flushed red. Beye’s words were extremely arrogant and rude, basically holding her in contempt. If her level was only passable, didn’t that mean her actual combat ability was nothing much?

However, she pushed down the surging shame and refused to act rashly, actually taking a step back. It had taken her but a moment to think of the many legends surrounding Beye; this woman was never arrogant or rude, only speaking the truth. She did not need to lie and deceive to achieve her goals.

Fuschia also remembered Beye’s identity. If this woman wanted to kill Richard, even two of herself would not be able to stop her. Forget that, she wasn’t even a match for the bald man nearby.

Since she recognised Beye, Fuschia naturally knew the man’s identity as well. The great Fire Dragon Warlock, Canskal Orfidi. The same level as her, but just like Beye his power far surpassed his rank. His true abilities only showed themselves in his true form; Canskal was not a human, but a fire dragon. He only maintained his human form through a transformation spell.

Beye was not a public name, her legends only known within specific circles of those with true power. This was why Richard did not know her. Fuschia immediately realised that they hadn’t come for his life.

Seeing Fuschia back away tactfully, Beye no longer paid attention to her and continued towards Richard, “Agamemnon recommended you.”

“Agamemnon? Then you’re... “ Richard relaxed upon the mention of a familiar name. At least this person didn’t have completely bad intentions.

“My name is Beye, that good-for-nothing’s sister,” Beye said indifferently.

Richard subconsciously frowned, albeit not because of her words. Every syllable that came from her mouth gave off a murderous aura that pricked into his body like a needle. However, that was the end of it. The chase by Red Cossack and the war to the death with Sinclair back in Faelor had built up a life of daily bloodbaths that had toughened his heart.

Richard smiled, “Good-for-nothing? Why do I remember Nyris saying ordinary people are no match for him?”

“I am no ordinary person.” Beye’s reply was straightforward, without the slightest bit of embellishment.

Richard withdrew his smile, growing serious, “Alright. Jokes aside, I’m not sure what he recommended me for exactly.”

Beye towered over Richard at nearly 1.9 metres tall. A slight turn of her white pupils and Canskal took out a blueprint from his robes, handing it to Richard. “Make this,” she said in a commanding tone.

Richard opened the blueprint up, only to see that it held a complete blueprint for a rune. Every material required, every step in the process was marked upon it. As long as the runemaster was powerful and skilled enough, they would be able to craft the rune properly.

This surprised him. Custom rune designs almost never had blueprints in circulation. Normally, the only way to learn a runemaster’s personal designs was to acquire them through an inheritance or by exchange.

Richard composed himself and continued to look at it carefully.

This rune was to be positioned on the arms, extracting the user's life force to provide a substantial boost to one's attack speed. There was also a small chance of additional effects like laceration, bleeding, necrosis and the like as well.

This vicious creation had a name to match: Life's Bane.

Richard looked over it for ten whole minutes before letting out a deep breath. He lifted his head, looking straight at Beye's eyes and asking dully, "This is a grade 3 rune, why come to me? Lunor is a grand runemaster, you should have gone to him."

Beye's response didn't hold the slightest bit of anger, "He can't do it."

"I c..." Richard swallowed the words at the tip of his tongue, looking into Beye's eyes without flinching. Locking eyes with her was torturous, but he was not afraid, "How does it benefit me?"

Something shifted in the depth of Beye's white pupils. "One day, if you step into the Battlefield of Despair," she said in a deep voice, "I will guarantee your life."

"Alright, but you have to wait," Richard said bluntly.

"I'm very patient." Beye turned around, leaving with the Fire Dragon Warlock in tow. Her figure disappeared the moment she stepped out the door; Richard knew she had left through the window in the corridor, but he had no idea how exactly she had accomplished it.

It was only a long time after Beye left that Fuschia let out a sigh. She looked at Richard with sincere admiration in her eyes, "You actually managed to joke around with her."

However, Richard did not respond; he was still wondering about Beye's words. "What is the Battlefield of Despair?"

"A plane used especially for wars, where we fight to the death with our enemies from other planes. It is a world that belongs only to powerhouses; anyone who can actually make their way out of it

is a lunatic!” There was still a tinge of lingering fear in Fuschia’s voice.

“Isn’t that basically a planar war?” Richard asked.

“No!” Fuschia responded immediately, “The enemies we fight in the Battlefield of Despair are other primary planes!”

Richard shivered.

He opened the Life’s Bane blueprint once more. He could see an endless rain of blood that reaped countless lives from this rune. It had soul.

.....

Three months after Richard had left, the Lighthouse of Time in Bluewater lit up once more. When Richard walked out from the portal, the first thing he did was to take a deep breath of the intoxicating blazing air of the Bloodstained Lands. Having spilt blood here for almost an entire year, having gone from a nobody to laying the foundation for his rule, he had already developed deep feelings for the place.

“Master, you’re back!” the broodmother’s voice immediately rang out in his mind. He was surprised by her words at first, only remembering after a moment that the week or so he had spent in Norland was three months here.

“Is something going on?” he replied.

“It’s time to sweep away the Bloodstained Lands!” the broodmother declared, her voice laced with killing intent.

“Hmm... It still seems a little early for that.” Richard had never expected the broodmother’s words. She didn’t seem like a contract beast at all. Only a year had passed since he had acquired her, but she felt no less wise than anyone else present.

“No! I need more food, I’ve been stuck at level 5 for too long!” Her bloodthirst was quite clear and intense.

“Alright, alright.” Pacifying the broodmother, Richard turned to look over the team that had followed him this time.

A total of 26 men— a mix of knights in training and free Archeron soldiers— Flowsand, a surprise appearance in battle priest Io, and Demi. This was the entirety of the troop Richard had brought, costing a grand sum of 600,000 gold to transport. The soldiers were carrying giant magic chests in pairs, holding the enchanted equipment as well as some runecrafting materials.

The return to Faelor caused Richard to feel smug. The only awkward thing was Io.

Flowsand had brought this level 12 battle priest out from the Church of the Eternal Dragon. One level higher than even herself, his large-scale buffs and other spells were extremely powerful and cost less to cast. On the battlefield, especially in Richard’s comfort zone during smaller scale wars, there was no way to exaggerate his impact.

And yet...



## Book 3, Chapter 66 - A Long Time

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The problem with Io was twofold: he was far too handsome, and practically inseparable from Flowsand as if he were her shadow.

Although he was a youth, he had the stature and charm of a mature man; his figure overwhelmed Richard's, at least for now. Alongside his elegant, sacred aura and the outfit from the Church designed for battle priests, he was as dazzling as the sun. Stood next to him, Richard looked like a young and inexperienced teen. Of course, Richard was confident in cutting him apart whether they were in melee combat or far apart.

Even more frustrating was the fact that Flowsand had absolute trust in the youth, not stopping him from getting close. It offset Richard's mood greatly; he wanted to ask her about it, but didn't know where to start. Io behaved like he was Flowsand's personal guard; he did everything for her, but still maintained a strict distance.

‘But the boundary is only ten centimetres? That's too close!’

Richard also questioned whether he truly was Flowsand's guard. Since when were members of the clergy guarded by those of their ilk?

The Eternal Dragon had thousands upon thousands of blessings he could grant. Richard had only seen hundred-odd types, and had no idea what a heavenly guardian was. But he would likely still feel disturbed even if he did know about it. Heavenly guardians weren't the same as the broodmother's normal drones; outside of extreme intelligence, they also had their own souls. Outside of their absolute devotion to their masters, they retained full autonomy in any other matter. This made them very similar to someone like Phaser.

While Richard was sorting out the mess in his heart, the strange movements from the Lighthouse of Time had alarmed all of his

followers that had been defending it. Once he exited the teleportation hall, he was greeted by a thundering voice.

“BOSS! You’re finally back! It’s been three months, I wouldn’t know how to continue if you didn’t come back!” The bold, boorish voice belonged to none other than Gangdor. He quickly strode towards Richard, his body covered in dust after a long journey but his steps more steady and powerful than they had been three months ago. The gigantic brute still carried an axe on his shoulders, although this scarlet one was even bigger than before.

Gangdor often switched up his axes, but the one constant was his hunger for blood. There were two fresh scars on his neck, wounds that still hadn’t healed completely. The past few months clearly hadn’t been dull.

The brute’s eyes lit up at the sight of Richard. He laughed heartily as he walked over, opening his arms in preparation for a hug. However, he immediately remembered the difference in their identities and pulled his hands back, scratching his head with an awkward chuckle.

Of course, Richard didn’t have any such qualms. He walked right up and bumped Gangdor’s chest forcefully, giving the man a fierce hug. The collision almost sent him flying backwards!

Waterflower was standing next to Gangdor, her expression conflicted and her hands trembling. Richard didn’t give it much thought, giving the girl a powerful hug as well. Her entire body stiffened up like iron upon contact, hands instinctively reaching for the hilt of her sword; however, a gentle shiver passed down her spine and she grew as soft as water, allowing Richard to wrap his arms around her in an embrace.

Richard quickly let go of her, only to find an enormous figure next in line. There was no way for him to hug this fellow; Tiramisu was almost three metres tall and astonishingly stout. The best case would only end up with hugging the ogre mage’s thigh; he had

grown much larger since they last met.

“Master! I’m level 13 now!” Tiramisu announced when Richard walked towards him.

Richard raised his head to look at the naive ogre and suddenly felt that something was off. “Why is your head crooked?”

Tiramisu instantly went down on one knee and tried to bend down, pointing to his left shoulder, “Master, look!”

There was a sore on the ogre’s shoulder, as big as a teacup. It wasn’t an injury, instead a mass that was growing out from within. A pale yellow horn could be seen forming within, the flesh swollen as though something was about to burst and break through from within.

Richard instantly recalled the ability of ogres to mutate, asking with pleasant surprise, “You’re growing your second head?”

Tiramisu nodded forcefully, “It’s Medium Rare, I’m darn sure that’s him!”

“I think so too!” Richard smashed his fist against Tiramisu’s chest. He put all his energy into it, but the hand just bounced off the ogre’s natural coarse skin due to his thick body fat that served as a natural armour.

Ogres grew absurdly powerful once they underwent a mutation. The mages of Norland had performed thorough research on this species long ago, finding that any ogres that could grow a complete second head were natural elites of the species. However, the second head only splintered off from their original soul, forming a personality and intellect that was independent of the first. It would still be Tiramisu, not Medium Rare.

But of course, Richard wouldn’t tell the ogre that. This secret would be kept buried in his heart forever.

Richard then looked past the ogre, seeing Zendrall. The necromancer also enjoyed a big hug, although it wasn’t very

pleasant for either of them. The necromancer's vicinity was rife with an aura of death, making anyone nearby uncomfortable. On the other hand, Richard was still surrounded by the blessing of the Eternal Dragon. Although timeforce wasn't exactly holy, its destructive effects on the power of death were not one whit inferior to divinity.

The two mages were grimacing in pain on the inside, but they smiled and laughed with joy.

"My Lord, you should make me one of those... What do you call them... runes." The necromancer was reclusive by nature, and his heart had been sealed off for the past three decades or so. Asking for anything outside of corpses was a tactful way of expressing his feelings.

"Rest assured," Richard laughed in reply, "I've already prepared a bargain for you!"

Zendrall broke into a smile, although it didn't look good on him at all.

It was then that Richard realised one of his soldiers was missing. "Where's Olar?" he asked.

"Today's his turn with the army. I think you'll only get to see him at night, boss!" Gangdor explained.

Asking a few more questions, Richard discovered that his followers had kept themselves occupied ever since he'd left. They had taken turns with the troops, catching out the bandit groups and caravans of Red Cossack regularly. The constant attacks forced Red Cossack to dispatch large armies to defend every caravan, only then maintaining the current deadlock. If they allowed Red Cossack to have the upper hand, perhaps those troops would currently be waiting right outside Bluewater Oasis.

As he was briefed about the situation on the battlefield, Richard interrupted with a quizzical expression on his face, "Waterflower

can lead troops too?”

The young lady snorted and looked towards the sky, refusing to comment.

Gangdor pulled Richard aside, quietly giving him the details. The young lady had first gone out to war alongside him, but the two had completely different perspectives on battle strategy. The dispute was eventually resolved through combat. Gangdor was only one level higher than her ever since she had risen to level 12, so he was certainly no match for her when she activated Breath of Darkness. After many such fights, the two had parted ways and decided to lead the troops separately.

Gangdor might appear crude, but it took a lot of cunning to retain one's life in the Archeron death camps. He had crammed himself with knowledge on commandership, putting much effort in learning how to be a general. He proved to be a natural leader in war.

However, nobody would have imagined that Waterflower was skilled at leading troops as well. Her powerful intuition allowed her to identify the enemy's weaknesses clearly, and she had the patience and endurance to wait until the prey was most relaxed. Her armies would then suddenly erupt, delivering a fatal blow to the enemy's weak points.

Richard had already experienced that dreadful strategy of targeting crucial points personally.

Olar loved to identify small, weak armies, strengthening his troops with his warsong before burying the enemies with numbers. Kellac himself had once been a commander, so there were no problems on that end, which only left Zendrall remaining. Every necromancer was proficient at leading armies of their own minions, and the addition of other soldiers only made him more frightening,

Phaser was the only exception. Nearly every battle she fought in

was fruitful. Regardless of who led the troops, she only paid attention to massacring all the enemies present.

“Where’s Phaser?” Richard only recalled the special unit when she was mentioned.

Phaser appeared in his mind’s eye the moment he thought of her. She was still a product of the broodmother, after all, and was connected to him through a spiritual link.

However, Richard immediately realised that Phaser had entered stealth, circling around the knights and free Archeron soldiers as she locked onto a target.

“STOP!”

The cry was very timely. Phaser had just exposed herself, appearing behind one of the infantry knights. The dagger that was her left hand had already slid in through his armour, about to pierce through his heart from behind.

She stopped instantly, transmitting a message to Richard’s mind, “Master, he wanted to kill you.”

“I know. It’s alright, let him go.”

The knight, his legs going weak. He looked at Phaser who suddenly appeared so close to him with shock and fear. This was Erwin. Richard hadn’t been joking when he mentioned the punishment, actually bringing him to Faelor.

In the short span of time they had spent apart, Phaser had already risen to level 8. With one of Sinclair’s daggers as well as her abilities, she could now easily kill off anyone at or below level 10 while fighting evenly with many that had crossed that mark.

Done with greeting his followers one by one, Richard allowed his team from Norland to rest as he instructed a group of soldiers to deliver the supplies to the warehouse. He then returned to his command centre in the camp, starting a meeting with all his followers and any other prominent figures. Although planar travel

was quite exhausting, he had no plans to rest.

After all, it had been three months since he had last set foot in Faelor. He had to take control of the situation immediately.

## Book 3, Chapter 67 - Life's Bane

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In front of Richard was a map of the Bloodstained Lands and nearby territories. It was very precise, much of it drawn up by Richard himself. Richard looked over the positions of his followers upon it as he asked, "What's the situation?"

The broodmother immediately responded in his mind, "Everything is settled in the Land of Turmoil, I can enter the Bloodstained Lands right now."

"Just wait there quietly!" Richard didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

The broodmother was his trump card, and the current situation was unlike any other. His army was a mix of honest soldiers and bandits, and Bluewater held considerable might. How could he afford to expose her to the enemy? Even though the broodmother had considerable power at level 5, not fearing the saints of Faelor, she would still be in trouble if multiple enemies ganged up on her. With her snail-like speed, there would be no escape.

She was not meant for battle, just like how a mage wasn't meant for melee even if they had some sort of ability like Eruption.

In the end, Gangdor and Kellac started explaining the situation. Falcao had left after a month, while Rolf and Lord Moonbear had continued to guard Bluewater. However, Lord Moonbear had decided to withdraw his troops just a few days ago, and Red Cossack had already gotten the news. They were reportedly gathering their troops on a large scale, prepared to wipe out Richard's army in one fell swoop.

The two sides had erupted in a multitude of small battles over the past three months, each suffering casualties. Richard's followers had whittled away at Red Cossack's caravans all this while, forcing them to give up on any small businesses. The caravans were now all guarded by enormous armies, rendering most of the attacks



unsuccessful.

“How is the situation in my territory?” Richard asked. After all, it was still a good fief.

“It couldn’t be worse,” Gangdor said with a shrug, “There’s probably only a few hundred people there, maybe even less.”

“What is the matter?” Richard frowned.

“Earl Layton, a relative of the Sacred Unicorn. He frequently sends men down to your territory to capture anyone they see. The Red Cossack bandits go there to pay a visit sometimes as well, although I think they’re only stealing rations. If you ask me, boss, your territory was originally a wasteland. They just want to vent their anger by attacking it.”

“Layton? Are they still in Fontaine’s barony?”

“Yes, but they took away a few hundred people recently. There’s about 2,000 left now.”

Richard laughed coldly, “Since they don’t want to leave, let’s have them stay!” It seemed like his territory was worth more than he had assumed. They likely hated his lands disrupting their resources.

This place was originally on the fringe of the Direwolf Duke’s territory. At least for the next decade, he wouldn’t be turning his focus in this direction. A suitable middleman with the right tricks would likely be able to buy it off Bevry for a reasonable price. However, now that Richard was the owner of the land there were no legal means for them to obtain it.

Richard stowed the map away, “Tell Devon, Amon, and Rolf that I’m back. If it’s convenient, I’d like to meet up for a meal.”

Just as his followers were about to leave, Richard called out to Gangdor once more, “Right, send word that the bounty on Chuck and Phinbar is now 300,000 each. This will make Red Cossack uneasy!”

“300,000?! We can hire saint assassins with that!” Gangdor cried out in disbelief, “They’ll really be worried this time. Boss, you’ve become rich!”

“Yes!” Richard laughed, kicking the large man out.

.....

It was evening in Faust, and Nyris once again had an opportunity to dine with his father. To him, this was a mix of pain and pleasure. The good thing was that there would be many dishes that could only be savoured in the Emperor’s presence, but the dinner was no better than a battlefield. The barrage of questions was normally more than he could handle.

“I heard Richard is back in Faelor?” the Emperor asked.

The two had dined together more frequently as of late, mostly because of Richard. Nyris was glad that he had the sense to support the runemaster firmly; if not for that, he wouldn’t have so many chances. He had sixteen adult siblings, with many more that were not yet ten. The number of them who had awoken their bloodlines went into the double digits, and he wasn’t the most outstanding of them all. He needed to work hard; merely being in the presence of His Majesty was a form of victory for the princes and princesses.

“Yes. The Church also sent two of their own with him. Outside of Daybreak, there was another battle priest by the name of Io. This is a name that hasn’t been heard in the Church before.”

“Tell me what Richard took to Faelor,” Philip changed the topic.

One couldn’t just read from a piece of paper in the Emperor’s presence. Both of Nyris’ hands were filled with food, but he still spoke as fast as possible as he listed everything Richard had taken. He had memorised all the details, something that was only expected when one dined with the Emperor. They had to gather as much news as they could before every meal, regarding every kind of event in Faust as well as any major movements elsewhere on the

continent. One also needed to prepare for any possible queries the Emperor might have, researching all the subjects deeply. Nyris had gathered a list of everything Richard had taken during his return to Faenor; thankfully, that decision was not in vain.

His political growth depended largely on such preparations.

Philip nodded his head in satisfaction once Nyris was done, “This kid is good, he actually knows how to earn money from other planes. He’s worthy of calling himself someone from the Deepblue. Oh yes, I heard Beye met him in private?”

“Agamemnon arranged it. I heard she needed Richard to help her craft a rune called Life’s Bane.”

“How did Richard respond?”

“He took the blueprint.”

“He took it?!” Philip suddenly stopped eating, subconsciously circling his fork around on the plate for a while before he managed to continue, “Life’s Bane isn’t easy to craft. Lunor has tried it for seven years with no success.”

“Isn’t it just a grade 3 rune? It can’t be all that difficult. Lunor is just too unskilled; the royal runemasters of the other empires are on a completely different level!” Nyris said angrily, “It takes so much from our budget to buy powerful runes from the black market! I really hope Richard can grow up faster!”

Ever since he had gotten Richard to craft runes for them at the 1:5 ratio, he was growing increasingly annoyed with Lunor. The only reason the old man was still a royal runemaster was that more runemasters was always better. However, Lunor’s student had no hope of becoming the family’s next runemaster. Foster would need to actually grow his ability for that to happen, not just relying on his connections as he currently did.

Philip suddenly smiled, “The old men from the Sacred Tree Empire and the Millennial Empire couldn’t do it either. Do you

really think Beye didn't try that in secret?"

Now it was Nyris' turn to be shocked. He finally understood why his father, someone who was only ever concerned about food, actually stopped to think for a while. If the runemasters from the other two empires could not craft it, this Life's Bane rune was more difficult to produce than many grade 4 runes! For Richard to keep it was truly unusual!

Nyris had gained a better understanding of Richard's personality after their visit to the Forest Plane. The Archeron runemaster would never promise something he wasn't confident in delivering; accepting the blueprint without any deadline meant the problem was with his level, not his ability to replicate the design. One's mana pool would naturally increase as long as they worked hard.

Another striking detail was that Beye had actually given the blueprint to Richard after a single meeting. This showed just how much value she now attached to him.

"Would the White Night really go to so much trouble for a mere grade 3 rune?" Nyris probed. Even though he was a prince, he still didn't know too much about the might of powerhouses.

Philip looked at Nyris for a while and muttered to himself before saying, "You're a lucky kid. You might have a bright future ahead, and you choose your friends well. Alright then, let me tell you a few things in advance. Life's Bane is a grade 3 rune, yes, but the more of it you craft the higher its level. This is a rare type of rune called a stacking rune; the real difficulty is in the overlaying component. This makes the rune more difficult to craft than many grade 4 runes, to the point that only saint runemasters could normally make it. This isn't a problem in itself, but the trouble lays in the time one wastes on it. It might take one six months to a year to craft it even for a saint. Lunor has trouble making even grade 4 runes, he definitely doesn't have the skills to even try."

"Stacking rune?" This was the first time Nyris had heard this

term.

“Stacking runes are runes that can be placed over another rune at the same slot. However, they’re different from hybrid runes; as long as the user has the carrying capacity, they can add in as many as they like. Three, four, even five runes won’t be a problem! Even though Life’s Bane is only grade 3, this special ability makes it one of the best single runes for killing in existence,” Philip explained patiently.

## Book 3, Chapter 68 - Miscalculation

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Nyris was well aware of the powers of Life's Bane... If the rune could be layered... A doubling in attack speed wasn't just a doubling of one's damage output. There were also the other effects; the more runes that were layered, the more likely one of them would be triggered.

He gained a renewed understanding of just how much of an impact powerful runemasters had on the empire.

Nyris stopped eating as well, struggling internally for a long time before asking, "Father, should I find a way to Faelor and join Richard's expedition?"

Philip cut a kilogram of meat out and threw it into his mouth, "Faelor is vast, only one step away from becoming a primary plane. Such a place is priceless, worth more than dozens of ordinary secondary planes. Are you eyeing its riches?"

Nyris smiled, "There are more planes than true runemasters. If I wanted to develop a plane, couldn't I just ask you?"

Philip nodded, "Then why do you want to go to Faelor?"

Nyris grew solemn, "A truly strong bond is formed on the basis of friendship mixed with benefits. I cannot make a true friend of Richard just through business."

Philip smiled, "You're already smarter than your brothers, but... Hmm, still not enough. Well, do whatever you want. I'm increasing your allowance by 30% for this year."

"Thank you, Father!" the prince exclaimed in excitement. All noble youths knew that a greater allocation of resources would stabilise growth.

.....

As dusk approached, the Deepblue in the distant Floe Bay

suddenly burst into an uproar. Her Excellency Sharon, who had been gone a long time, had appeared once again. The legendary mage looked just as haggard as before.

Sharon unloaded a ridiculous number of items from her spatial equipment in front of the grand mages, forming a small hill in the meeting hall. These were all items she had dredged up from various planes or odd spacetime turbulence. Some could be priceless, others worthless, but even the things proven to be useless would sell for a high price.

Anything the legendary mage fancied had to be special. Other high-level mages placed a high value on such items; even if these items had no true purpose, just proving that alone was extremely valuable. Opportunities were rare to research items from spacetime turbulence; such objects could allow one to look past the laws of the plane.

Sharon had never been one to work this hard. Grand mages from all around had gathered in the Deepblue in recent years, waiting for the next auction. Of course, to Sharon it was just clearing out the scraps. Although the legendary mages of the continent cared too much about their reputations to make a trip personally, most of them had sent over capable representatives to bring some treasure back.

“Your Excellency! Your fruits!” Blackgold had learnt from the previous instance. He gave her a filled spatial ring before she even finished unloading the items.

The legendary mage was startled, taking the ring and wearing it on her middle finger alongside two others. Seeing this tiny detail, the grand mages knew she had grown stronger once more. Even though the legendary mage hadn’t grown in level, every additional ring she could wear meant her power had grown accordingly.

Seeing her about to leave right away, Grandmaster Fayr stepped forward and said hastily, “Your Excellency, there is a letter for

you! It is very important, from—”

“I’ll read it next time!” the legendary mage said lazily. The silhouette of a portal had already formed between her hands.

“Richard!” Fayr finally mentioned the most important thing.

Sharon trembled, subconsciously waving both her arms to forcefully toss the partial portal out of the window. The violent mana expanded rapidly as it flew a few kilometres away, eventually growing too unstable and exploding.

An extremely dazzling beam of light lit up the sky above Floe Bay. What seemed to be a black sun gradually rose into the air, guzzling up energy endlessly even as its edges erupted with golden lightning. By the time the sun faded away, the entire space seemed to have been distorted. What followed was a blinding white flash that lit up the entire world!

When the shockwaves hit the majestic tower of the Deepblue, all of the defensive formations were triggered. For a moment, it was as though a hurricane had swept past them, causing a violent reaction from the cloud of mana that lingered around the tower’s roof all year round. The brilliant colours were glistening indefinitely, as though a heavenly being had descended upon Norland.

Huge waves over dozens of metres tall surged from the sea’s surface, pushing towards the coast before smashing into the steep cliff.

Such force...

All the grand mages were silenced in an instant. The sheer amount of mana within that portal was beyond imagination, leaving them so excited they even forgot to protect themselves. Their mouths were lying wide open, their eyes dull; they didn’t even notice their staffs falling to the ground.

One of them finally spoke up in an extremely hoarse voice, “Is



that... a legendary spell Her Excellency developed recently?”

“That...” another murmured, “Was it even magic?”

No one answered his question.

The seventeen grand mages of the Deepblue were all standing in the meeting hall on the top floor, completely stupefied. All kinds of expressions filled their faces, and they couldn’t control themselves for a moment.

Sharon’s expression had been no different, but she recovered a split second faster. Using that slight time difference, she immediately wiped the cold sweat off her head and put on an expression of casual arrogance.

All of the grand mages then turned their heads, gazes landing on her.

The legendary mage already had both hands on her waist, saying aggressively, “What are you looking at, huh? I just used a spell, what’s the big deal? And you, Fayr, remember to get straight to the point next time. Don’t always be so slow!”

All gazes immediately gathered on Fayr. The instigator could no longer maintain his calm, forehead beading with sweat as he agreed with a forced smile. He then handed Richard’s letter to the legendary mage.

Sharon snorted, opening the letter and reading it repeatedly. There was only a single line within, but she read it a dozen times.

Richard had inscribed a complicated spatial formula into this letter. Solving it would allow one to obtain a set of planar coordinates. As fast as she was, Sharon took some time to decipher the code; an ordinary grand mage wouldn’t be able to perform the calculations even if they saw the formula. Even legendary mages without expertise in planar travel or spatial magic would have to rely on alchemic equipment and spend a lot of time.

The legendary mage’s face suddenly started glowing all of a

sudden. “My little Richard actually got himself a plane!” she cheered, “I have to go see! You lot, get busy with your stuff!”

Sharon conveniently took a beyslace spider crystal off her ponytail, something she had learnt to use as an ornament from Mountainsea. Fortunately, the legendary mage only wore a single large ponytail; if she had seven or eight small ones like Mountainsea, such a thing could not be maintained.

Her slender fingers dug into the spider crystal, immediately releasing an extremely dazzling flash of light. The terrifying energy contained within the crystal was stimulated completely, turned into the required spell in an instant.

A beautiful rainbow of colour appeared between Sharon’s hands, stretching out from the window and leading directly into the sky. The legendary mage stepped on the rainbow bridge and turned into one herself, quickly breaking through space.

“Rainbow Bridge!” exclamations rang out in the Deepblue once more, “The legendary spell Rainbow Bridge!”

“Her Excellency can already cast Rainbow Bridge?!”

Rainbow Bridge was a legendary spell that was used to determine the location of a plane from its coordinates. Although the spell had caused everyone to exclaim, it actually wasn’t as terrifying as the space explosion earlier. Its advantage lay in that it was quick and straightforward, not requiring a complicated portal, but the cost was too high; one needed at least one spider crystal for every teleportation.

Even a few minutes after Sharon was gone, the grand mages in the meeting hall still couldn’t move. Grandmaster Fayr finally said something everyone was unwilling to express, “I think we need to have Her Excellency change the teleportation location to the roof next time...”

“That should keep Floe Bay safe...” of course, the grand mage

immediately realised his slip of tongue.

However, looking at the formidable power of that space explosion and recalling that Sharon always opened the portal right in front of them, the grand mages truly felt that such a thing was pointless. It was very likely that an explosion of that magnitude would directly destroy half of the Deepblue, and they would not be spared.

“Her Excellency’s teleportation magic... Could it be that it will never fail?” one of them asked helplessly. Sharon used planar teleportation all the time, and it was only now that they had seen what would happen if it failed.

All of the grand mages focused on Blackgold; they all knew he was the one who Sharon best. Blackgold was constantly wiping the sweat off his forehead, but he couldn’t get it clean. Noticing the inquiring gaze from his peers, he smiled awkwardly, “I think... Her Excellency has never considered the idea of her spells failing...”

The conference room suddenly fell into silence.

This was truly scary.

## Book 3, Chapter 69 - Fight

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A dazzling mote of light appeared before Sharon's eyes in the void. This was her destination, Faelor. The crystal wall surrounding the plane was already in front of her, and an incomparably pure stream of mana burst forth from her hands to create a passage that she entered through.

The view from the other side of the wall was completely different. There were numerous planets and stars floating in space here, but before she could even start looking for Richard's location a pike of golden light assaulted her!

A powerful collision sent the legendary mage flying back a great distance, her hair waving in the air. Her eyes spat fire as she glared at a lofty god with golden light around his body stepping out in front of her.

"Away, invader!" the god roared like thunder, "Faelor does not welcome you!"

A pale blue light appeared in Sharon's eyes. "A mere lesser god dares to say something like that?" she sneered, "Even the Lord of the Abyss can't chase me out of his territory, but a fool like you wants to try?"

The god instantly grew furious, "Wretched mortal! I will shackle you in a world of divine fire for ten thousand years!"

The shout caused the legendary mage to sigh helplessly, "You're saying such stupid things... You've never ventured outside this wall of yours, have you?"

However, her expression changed in the very next instant. The outlines of a dozen divine realms appeared in the void, gods walking out one after the other. Sharon's eyes went wide as saucers, and she sucked in a breath. "DAMN IT!" was all she could shout before she was drowned out by torrential waves of divine

force!

.....

Back within the meeting hall in the Deepblue, the grand mages were discussing how to convince Sharon to change her teleportation point to the roof of the tower. A portal suddenly appeared before them, the legendary mage flying out of it like a cannonball. She crashed down to the ground, taking out not only the conference table but also two successive floors before she stopped.

An inexplicably violent stream of divine force spurted out, converging into indescribable waves of fire that followed Sharon through the path she had smashed out. Only when the portal closed did the stream break off.

The grand mages were all experienced, instantly activating all sorts of defensive measures. However, all their attempts broke down upon contact with the divine flames.

Fortunately, the flames only rushed past them. The control gods had over their power far exceeded that of mortals. Basically no extra energy was expended, but still the glancing might was enough to overwhelm the mages. Any of them would have been completely annihilated if they were the target.

A terrifying, deep hole had already opened up in the floor. A few coughs sounded from the legendary mage underneath, before Sharon said intermittently, "I'm... fine! Get back to work! Anyone who needs healing, go get it done!"

A familiar wave of mana could be felt from the hole underneath. She'd already gone off to who-knew-where.

The entire group of grand mages was injured, groaning as they got up and looked at each other with eyes full of shock. Her Excellency had said she was going to visit another plane, but why did it seem like she had just robbed some god's divine kingdom?

.....

The sun was setting on Faelor. The story of the events near the crystal sphere was something most living beings would never come across in their lifetime. The millions upon millions of mortals of varying sizes were still walking their own paths, enjoying their lives and struggling in them as well.

Richard, who had already returned once more, already had enough clout in Bluewater Oasis to make changes in the city. The small place could no longer contain his strength, necessitating expansion.

He now had nearly a thousand soldiers, of which the humanoid soldiers and throwers were each equal to elite knights. With Flowsand, Io, and Kellac leading a clergy of nearly ten members, his force was something any organisation within the Bloodstained Lands would be envious of.

And then there were his followers, all young and full of potential. The battle might they had just displayed was enough to raise eyebrows.

The importance of Richard's first dinner after his return was huge. Only those closest to him could accompany him on this meal.

There were three more people attending the dinner. Outside of the ore merchant Bivier, Richard had never seen them before. Both the newcomers were recommended by Devon and Amon, representing large merchant groups. These powers had risen after the turmoil in the Bloodstained Lands, and each was backed by a true earl at minimum.

Sword Saint Rolf was elected to sit at the head of the table. In a world where might made right, this ought to have made logical sense. However, he felt the seat beneath his buttocks was slightly warm and uncomfortable. The War Construct scroll in his pocket caused him to look at Richard with a complicated look in his eyes.

To Rolf's left and right were Lord Moonbear and Richard respectively. Of course, Richard was obviously the star of the meal. Those familiar with him, like Devon, Bivier, and Amon, all knew that this dinner was essentially a private auction. Richard always had all sorts of items worth exclaiming over in his possession, and now that he had been gone so long it was very likely that he would surprise them all.

Everyone had little interest for the delicacies lining the table, taking a few hasty bites before putting down their cutlery. Richard had a waiter clean up and then smiled, "Everyone, I spent the last three months on my master's semiplane..."

This sentence brought a ruckus from the newcomers. Richard was finally indicating his teacher's status; only a legendary being could own a semiplane. On the other hand, those who understood him a little better wouldn't believe him. The sullied divine scrolls already revealed that Richard was backed by someone far more powerful. Legendary beings could intervene in matters between gods, but there was a limit to what they could do.

Richard had no choice but to raise his hand, calming everyone down, "I don't know if you all would be interested, but I have returned with a batch of equipment. Let's start off with this sword... Don't misunderstand, this is just a sample."

Richard placed the magic sword on the table as he spoke. The expressions of the two saints changed in a single look, and Bivier was soon to follow. As someone trained in ore and metal appraisal, he easily realised how much better this sword was than normal ones.

The weapon was passed around and everyone looked at it attentively. All their gazes landed on him the moment it returned to his hands, waiting for him to continue.

"It is a longsword made of lafite steel, enchanted for a coldness effect and added sharpness." Richard's words verified the guesses

of most. These swords were sufficient to equip a duke's core legion or the personal guards of an earl or marquess. It was very difficult to find enchanters on the market, and the largest batches that circulated were normally only a dozen to a score.

Devon was the first to speak, "3,500 gold for each, I want as many as you have." This was a reasonable price. A similar sword would be worth 5,000 in a human kingdom, but this was the Bloodstained Lands and Richard wanted to sell in bulk.

"Alright, I'll sell at that price. I've brought 200." Richard's words left everyone delighted in an instant, and all the swords were instantly divided up. The swords had been worth about 1,500 in Norland; such things were made in high quantities back home.

Richard then sold five of the crossbows at 40,000 gold each, including sixty arrows. Adding on half of the shields and armour, his total earnings reached 1.5 million gold.

Immediately after, he started purchasing in bulk. He bought heavy weapons, gauntlets, and half-body plate armour to equip a thousand people. This alone cost 800,000 and by the time he was finished with ores and magic materials only 300,000 was left.

"I need to hold onto this, just in case someone sends me a head from Chuck or Phinbar. I have to pay the bounty, no?" Richard explained with a smile.

"300,000 for the two of them?" Although everyone knew Red Cossack was a mortal enemy of Richard's, they were still shocked by the huge reward. Richard definitely wasn't exaggerating; anyone with the slightest ability at accounting would know he was left with 300,000 gold in hand.

Finding that many of them still hadn't learnt of the changed bounty, Richard smiled, "No, 300,000 each."

This time there was no ruckus from the seats. Everyone instead quieted down, immediately beginning to calculate how they could



get the heads of the two. With a promise of 300,000 gold, even a saint did not seem difficult to kill. Although everyone here had too much status to do it publicly, who in the Bloodstained Lands didn't have an underground channel or two? Even if the bounty wasn't that huge, such a business transaction would also greatly strengthen their relationship with Richard.

Rolf suddenly felt the War Construct scroll in his pocket burning.

.....

Once the dinner came to an end, Rolf was in no hurry to leave. He pulled Richard over, asking quietly, "Do you have more of that scroll?"

Richard acted like he didn't perfectly understand the swordsman, "Oh, the War Construct scrolls? They're very difficult to make, but it's not like I don't have any. I should be able to get a few for 20,000 each."

Rolf's eyes lit up, "I want two! I'll get someone to send you the money tonight!"

## Book 3, Chapter 70 - Prey

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Rolf had never heard of the Eternal Dragon before, but this god's requirements for his worshippers were incomparably simple. As long as one was willing to seek out items of great power and sacrifice them, that was enough. So-called pious followers would only have to mention his name and promise to perform a sacrifice to the best of their abilities during their lives. In other words, trying was enough; it didn't matter if one actually performed a ceremony. Of course, one would obviously get better benefits from offering something. The writing of the Church mentioned that the divine grace obtained upon sacrifice would definitely net the offerer more returns. When it was a matter of faith, no god could afford to lie.

The third level of the War Construct scroll was so close! Rolf knew that a single thought would qualify him. The price was the eternal wrath of the gods of this plane, but coming from a family of ancestor worshippers he already had no favour from them. This was a small price to pay.

The scroll seemed to be beating in his pocket on his way back from the meeting. The help of the third level of the scroll would give him the confidence to kill Chuck or Phinbar one on one, and he could still escape if both were together.

At the thought of the humiliation he had suffered in the past at their hands, Rolf's gaze grew darker. He had wished to see the heads of these two all this while, and now he could be paid 300,000 gold for one? Such a bounty left his heart thumping. Even a powerful saint would need a long time to amass such wealth.

Richard had already planted the seed; he only needed to wait for it to bud.

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Over the next five days, Richard acquired a lot of the land near

his camp at low prices, expanding it fivefold. This way, he could accommodate more buildings and soldiers in the area. Some of the small obstructions in the process had been taken care of instantly, not even reaching his ears.

The equipment he had ordered had arrived as well, taking up practically all of the storage space of the Golden Warflag and a few other large trade groups nearby. Most of them were quietly sent to the boundary of the Land of Turmoil.

After waiting for a few days for all of his new knights to integrate into the army, he spent one morning gathering his troops and left Bluewater Oasis.

Richard didn't plunder the Red Cossack caravans as many had expected him to, instead beginning the journey back to his territory. The threat of the people occupying the Fontaines' land left him exceedingly uneasy. He would first take care of this powder keg before it exploded. Maintaining such a large army was resulting in significant losses for the enemy, and the longer this went on the more they would hate him. If they took the initiative, he would be forced into a passive defence.

Leaving Bluewater Oasis and feeling the red soil under his boots once more, Richard felt his entire being relax. The soul nodes in his consciousness kept lighting up one by one, giving him a feeling of expanded awareness that was intoxicating. His world had expanded severalfold in a single moment.

Waterflower, the broodmother, his followers, the elite bats flying in the sky... They were all his eyes.

"How are we fighting this, boss?" Gangdor was following Richard's horse on foot, rushing across like the wind.

"We fight!" Richard played it down.

"Good!" Gangdor roared, his eyes twinkling, "I like this!"

The brute was no longer half-naked. Richard had forced him to

wear the enchanted scale mail he had returned with, something only half as heavy as full plate but with twice the toughness. The gauntlets for most normal soldiers had been repurposed into pauldrons for him. And Richard had also crafted a grade 2 defence rune for him. He was now a steel fortress, able to charge into a full legion of heavy knights once he activated Gaia's Force and the strength rune!

.....

Twilight Castle. Sir Odom suddenly stood up and grabbed the soldier front of him, "What did you say? That little bastard showed himself?!"

His thunderous roars resounded through the hall, shattering a few of the antique vases to leave a bunch of debris on the floor. The soldier turned pale in Odom's large hands, growing breathless. There was no way for him to speak.

"You'll kill him at this rate," Earl Layton reminded Sir Odom from the side. It was only then that the boor let go of the poor soldiers with a rough sigh, letting the soldier finish his report.

Sir Odom was a tanned man with a thorny beard, his heavy armour coloured a mix of black and dark red. The sharp spikes on the ends of the armour seemed extremely vicious as he walked to the door, grabbing an attendant and screaming, "Gather the cavalry! Also get those fucking mages and priests off their girls and tell them to prepare! We leave in an hour!"

Layton was shocked. "Odom, that's too little time!"

"70 kilometres, we'll reach the place in two hours," Odom objected.

"We won't have the time to pack supplies if we leave in an hour," Old Hogan advised from the side, "If we want to reach the place in two hours, not all of the footsoldiers will make it. Most of the mages and clerics will definitely fall behind! That could pose a

great risk, Richard isn't normal. He's been gone for so long... Now that he's suddenly shown himself, he must have some nasty plot."

Odom scoffed, "A plot? With just those 600 or so troops of his? Tell me, old man, how would you defeat me with just that force?"

Hogan's brows locked together, wrinkles deeply etched into his face in helplessness, "Just because he shows us 600 doesn't mean that is all he has."

"Enough!" Odom interrupted with a roar, jabbing at the other knight's chest with his middle finger, "Know your place, old man! I'm the highest power here, cut the bullshit and do as I say. Don't think you're the only one who knows how to lead an army into battle, my results are much better than yours. You were still a peasant when I started killing people!"

Old Hogan's expression changed. His background was a sting that could not be removed.

"Just take care of your troops and keep up. If any mage or cleric falls behind, take care of them. Just do your job!" Odom was like a black wargod, swirling out of the hall like a hurricane.

"Odom, wait! We can still discuss this!" Earl Layton shouted.

"What's there to wait for? I'm already dying in this castle. I want to vomit whenever I see Fontaine's wife's ass!" His voice grew more and more distant.

Earl Layton strolled to Sir Hogan's sighed, patting his shoulder with a sigh, "Don't mind it, that's just the kind of person he is. We have 700 elite cavalymen alone, and his personal heavy cavalry is around as well. There won't be any problem dealing with Richard."

Hogan shook his head, "Don't forget the 200 Golden Eagles that died at his hands."

Gloom filled Layton's face. That was still a mystery to this day, unsolved in the past three months.

It was unknown if the Direwolf Duke had discovered something. He informed the outside world that he was recuperating after the large war and had not left his place. No matter how they plundered Richard's lands or invaded any of the Duke's other vassals pretending they were lost, Bevry wasn't the least bit concerned. One of the Viscounts bordering Richard actually didn't even complain to the Duke, taking things to court instead and claiming it was a robbery. Two of the Golden Eagles were turned into scapegoats and sent to prison, turning them into laughing stocks in noble society.

Now that Richard had finally appeared, perhaps letting Odom go test the waters wasn't a bad option. Layton couldn't help but press his hand to his forehead. The entire matter was riddled with issues, all because of this frontier knight that had popped out of nowhere.

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An hour later, Odom was on his gigantic black warhorse as he led 700 cavalymen out. Many infantry battalions had been sent forth earlier, in addition to scouts that would determine the location of Richard's troops. Odom headed the army, hurrying forth at an acceptable speed.

Although they weren't moving much faster than a trot, without enough preparation beforehand it was still a very tiring task. The dozen or so mages and clerics were looking unwell within the first ten minutes.

Odom seemed like he couldn't care less, not showing any intent to let the cavalry slow down. Richard's best warriors were just level 10 or 11, and most of them were footsoldiers. The cavalry was made up of mere desert warriors as well. There was news that a group of mercenaries called the Demon Hunting Spears had joined Richard's army, but in the eyes of nobility, they were no different from bandits. How could they be mentioned in the same breath as a legion of proper knights?

Odom was very familiar with the Bloodstained Lands. He had once led thirty of his personal guards on an expedition to kill 400 bandits, leaving rivers of blood in his wake. The desert warriors couldn't even compare to those bandits, so why would he care about them?

When the hour mark arrived, the scouts returned with the location of Richard's camp. The discovery left Odom in high spirits; if he acted quickly, he could still rush back to Twilight Castle in time for dinner.

Some of the weaker mages and clerics were already falling behind.

## Book 3, Chapter 71 - Grit And Steel

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Two hours had passed by the time Odom's main cavalry finally caught sight of Richard. The camp had obviously been set up recently, the bonfires not yet lit. Both sides were already aware of the other's position, and Richard's troops had made camp slightly uphill as they finished their preparations.

When he saw the surprising discipline of Richard's troops as well as their superior arms, the corner of Odom's eye started twitching. His arrogance did not imply complacency; he naturally understood the situation in front of him. This battle would be harder than he had imagined.

Richard was surprised at the sight of Odom's troops. "Weren't there 2,000 men from Earl Layton in Twilight Castle?" he asked, "Why are there only 700."

Kellac looked closely at the opposing troops, "They're being led by Sir Odom, a powerful saint. It seems like he's brought all his cavalry, plus two great mages and priests."

Some of the huge bats were flying in the sky. It was strange to see bats in the daytime, but with all of his focus on the opponent Odom didn't notice that they weren't some kind of bird. One of the bats had already scouted the backup army from Sir Hogan. Even though the footsoldiers were moving quickly, they were still more than thirty kilometres from the battlefield.

"They want to try and beat me with just this many men?" Richard's expression was strange.

Kellac had never seen Richard command a battle, but he was familiar with noble armies. He made a quick assessment of each side's power, growing solemn, "Sir Richard, I fear this battle will not end well for us."

Richard put on a faint smile, "Just you watch."



Having said that, he pointed towards Odom before turning his palm towards the floor and gliding it across his throat.

All saints had powerful perception. Only a thousand metres away, Odom could clearly see Richard's act of provocation. He let out two heavy huffs, cracking all of his joints. His crouched horse sensed its master's anger and grew reckless, constantly kicking its steel hooves into the ground.

Odom took out an enormous three-headed flail from his saddle, raising it up high.

Thirty heavy cavalrymen, a hundred-strong elite cavalry, three hundred Golden Eagles and three hundred light cavalrymen all entered formation. The warhorses let out several hot breaths, their owner's gripping tightly onto the weapons in their hands.

"KILL THEM ALL!" Odom finally bellowed. His own dark figure was swift as he led by example, several companies charging out behind him.

The ground started shaking. Seeing a few hundred armoured warriors rush towards them, even Kellac's face changed.

The Demon Hunting Spears truly were elite warriors, but just as Odom had said they could not compare to the discipline and order of formal soldiers. Being farsighted and experienced, Kellac was well aware of this fact. The might of these charging soldiers could not be broken easily.

"Is Odom really level 16? It's too far away, I can't cast any detection spells," Richard asked unexpectedly.

"He truly is a saint!" Kellac emphasised. The most powerful warrior on Richard's side was only level 13.

"Merely a saint," Richard responded, raising his staff and turning to face Kellac, "Don't forget to cast War Construct on Gangdor later."

The heavy cavalrymen had already converged into a current of

steel, only a few hundred metres away from Richard's troops. They laid their lances flat, charging at full speed.

A resounding warsong suddenly broke out amongst Richard's troops, a melody of death, gold, and steel! This was a new song Olar had started using ever since he hit level 11, a grade higher than the original elven warsong.

The barbarian warriors at the front felt their blood boil. They roared a thunderous war-cry into the sky, forcefully slamming their heavy shields into the ground and supporting them with their shoulders. Those behind them placed heavy steel pikes into the ground, placing their shields over their heads before supporting those in front. This multiplied their resistance to the opponents' attacks. Those all the way in the back lifted their spears through the shield wall, striking forth.

The humanoid drones clutched tightly at their axes, backs ramrod straight. These drones were built for battle, unfamiliar with fear itself.

Io slowly walked forward with a radiant smile, speaking in divine tongue what sounded like a gospel song. It was resonant and glorious, golden light flying forth with every wave of the staff in his hand. Every beam was enough to cover thirty to forty warriors, and in a flash the few hundred in the four front rows were buffed with enhanced willpower, strength, and divine armour.

This was the battle priest's debut in battle. The imposing splendour and vigour left even Kellac, a former great priest of Faelor, in awe.

However, Richard was growing increasingly irritated with the fellow.

Fifty metres remaining...

Amongst those at the front of the charge, Odom felt his heart slowly sinking. The warsong and the spells made his heart

tremble; compared to the clerics of the opponent, those behind him seemed to be complete idiots. They had spent half a day to bless the horses and men, but that had only come up to a single effect!

He himself only had three spells cast on him, comparable to an ordinary barbarian in the opposing camp. However, there were hundreds of barbarians on the other side.

Thirty metres remaining...

He suddenly felt the ground tremble harder than it already was. His peripheral vision caught a batch of heavily armoured soldiers charging out from the forest nearby, their speed making it clear that they were all level 9 at minimum. This was only a smidgen away from qualifying to become a knight, elites amongst elites. However, why were these men only footsoldiers? Even if they were heavy infantry, what kind of foolish commander would make footsoldiers of such powerful soldiers?

Odom could no longer restrain his anger. Outside of his cruelty and short temper, he was actually a skilled leader of troops. Be it his personal ability or his commandership, he was better than Hogan in every way. A single glance at the soldiers streaming out of the forest made his heart ache. At least they were decently equipped.

However, the very next moment he realised something was wrong. A sudden sense of danger surged in his heart, one that he could not suppress. These elite soldiers were mimicking his path. If the light cavalry in the back was cut off, it would be a disaster! All of his hair stood erect as he raised his three-headed flail, bellowing thunderously, "CHARGE!"

The only chance for them to survive now was to rush forward and chisel through Richard's troops!

However, a powerful bolt of lightning suddenly fell upon him from the sky. Even with spell barriers protecting him, Odom was

struck hard by the lightning. He seemed to exhaust most of his strength for it, but immediately shook it off and continued the charge. Most of the hair on his head and face was smoking now, an overwhelming dizziness almost knocking him off his horse.

Richard inched his own horse forward, raising the Twin of Destiny high above his head. The fallen angel wing seemed to curl up, the entire staff body bursting with light at the seams as it showcased the full might of a legendary weapon!

Boosted by the Twin of Destiny, the grade 6 lightning spell had almost knocked the unprepared Odom off his horse. A few bursts of static still lingered nearby, leaving Odom's personal guard on the brink of collapse. This spell was nearly at grade 7 strength, and was enhanced by a chain lightning effect.

Richard decided that he would be the star of this battle, spurring his horse on as he raced back and forth. His staff was twirling constantly, several flashes of lightning raining down from the sky in a vicious attack on Odom's troops. His might was truly frightening.

Still, despite his face being charred, Odom gritted his teeth and dashed through the last ten metres without falling off his horse. His energy even spread out to protect those closest to him, putting the might of a saint on full display.

Richard's face turned gloomy... Not managing to knock Odom off his horse meant not managing to snatch the glory from Io. The battle priest was far too prominent, but he had already used Blaze. Any further and he would need to rely on Outburst from Flowsand, but that was not a wise choice in the current situation.

Richard knew he was losing his calm. The lightning spells weren't the most appropriate choice earlier; that would have been Nature's Beckon. A bunch of direbears amidst the heavy cavalry would destroy the enemy formation, cutting their power down to a third.

The last five metres!

Odom bellowed once more, the flail in the air finally landing on the shield wall. The three heads shattered the shields of three barbarians, wood and steel shattering as the large bodies of the barbarians flew into the sky. Blood spurted everywhere from their caved-in chests.

The flail was knocked back so hard that Odom's horse neighed loudly and slowed down. Gangdor— fortified by numerous magic and divine spells— immediately charged out of the formation as he shot towards Odom like a meteor!

## Book 3, Chapter 72 - Grit And Steel(2)

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A dull bang rang out and the two men separated, both in a sorry state. Odom's warhorse lost strength in its legs, almost crumbling to the ground. With his rune and all the buffing spells, Gangdor was only at a slight disadvantage compared to Odom, able to curb the saint's attack. This was the key to the battle.

Richard forced himself to calm down once more, sending out command after telepathic command. A fierce whistle rang out in the sky, and a dark cloud swept over the front row barbarians to land in the midst of the charging cavalry. These were the poisonous axes of the throwers, capable of breaking apart armour within thirty metres. Three quick volleys left over half the enemy riders injured.

This was where the army distinguished itself from a group of bandits. Any Red Cossack cavalry would have been ruined by those three volleys, formation broken apart. However, Odom's cavalry continued to charge despite several new holes opening up in their number, a flood of steel that would engulf everything.

It was at that moment that a dark grey light flashed at the head of their formation, the ten-odd heavy cavalymen at the front suddenly slowing down. Now that they were finally within Demi's casting range, her mass slow spell shut down their sharp advance. Dull sounds of collision rang out continuously as the cavalry met Richard's shield wall; although there were many points where they broke through for a moment, the barbarians still held their ground.

Battle cries rang out as Richard's warriors pulled out their axes, beginning a desperate fight against the stopped knights. However, they weren't the ones that struck fear into the hearts of the enemy; that honour belonged to the hundred humanoid drones. Each battle unit was expressionless, heavy-handed, and vicious, eyes glued upon the enemy. They didn't react to any sort of injury,

swinging their axes over and over as if their bodies were made of wood.

No one wanted such an opponent. These drones were not insane; they were just emotionless, unfeeling war machines!

A hundred humanoid warriors met the Golden Eagles, leaving thirty dead on each side in only a few exchanges. The enemy morale had collapsed completely as they fell into the swamp that was Richard's army, already beginning to show signs of retreat. Three volleys of flying axes, an unbreakable barrier, and these war machines were all intense blows, beating them down again and again until there was nothing left. The humanoids were indifferent to the fall of their comrades, not so much as flinching even when they themselves were injured gravely.

This was the biggest difference between the broodmother's drones and human warriors. Even if all their comrades fell in the blink of an eye, the battle drones would fight to the end. However, it took an elite army to avoid collapsing with even a quarter of their forces killed.

With the frontlines temporarily stuck in a stalemate, Odom had fallen deep into Richard's army as he fought alone without thought of death. His three-headed flail flew like the wind, reaping flesh and blood with every strike; his entire body was covered with energy as thick as blood. However, the results were far from what he had imagined. The enemies did not collapse, nor were they defeated. The casualties weren't even all that high. Gangdor and Tiramisu took on most of the attacks, the others vile wolves that looked for the right opportunities to bite off his flesh.

The two did not know how many times they had withstood the saint's attacks. The spells and armour could only block half of Odom's strength at most, the rest of the damage borne by their bodies. However, sacred light constantly healed their wounds at visible speeds; they only had to retreat for a brief moment before they were in front of Odom once more.

It was Odom who felt his body begin to grow heavier. The buffs on his body had been dispelled a long time ago, and the red-haired girl on the other side was sending curse after curse his way. Even though he managed to suppress them with his energy, whatever was left still caused his head to hurt. The power of this young girl's curses far surpassed those of the so-called great mage he had brought along. If not for that, these curses would not be affecting him.

And the young female cleric next to her... No, that girl's spells were at the level of a full-fledged priest, but there was still no sign of her running out of mana! Without her endless healing spells, Odom would have defeated Gangdor and Tiramisu long ago. Was the book in her hands a divine weapon? Why were spells being cast every time she flipped a page?

After another swing of his flail pushed Gangdor back, Odom couldn't stand it anymore and was forced to stop for a breath. The air was filled with the thick smell of blood; in that short pause, he suddenly felt a stinging pain in his lower back! One of Richard's warriors had an enchanted crossbow in hand. He didn't want to fight any further after hitting his target, immediately retreating from the battle.

This was the biggest strength of Richard's tactic. Outside of Gangdor and the ogre, every soldier in this fight was enacting or supporting a sneak attack. Self-preservation was the most important factor; every engagement was touch and go, restricting any attempt to target the spellcasters first.

By this point, Richard had already gotten the humanoid warriors around the enemy flanks. A total of 500 fully-armed warriors easily killed off the light cavalry blocking them, surrounding Odom's heavy cavalry from behind as they began a massacre.

A sacred light flashed across the sky once more, this time falling on Odom's knights. The shining Io had already buffed their own troops to the utmost, but just as it seemed like he had nothing left



to do he actually started to dispel the spells on the enemy. He seemed so bright at that moment it was like a god had entered the battlefield!

Richard couldn't help but grow angry once more.

One of Odom's great mages seemed extremely flustered, failing his spells multiple times. He finally decided on a direction to escape in, preparing an acid fog spell in the hopes of opening a road to survival.

Richard steadied his warhorse, coldly beginning an incantation. He almost never used chanted spells on the battlefield, but this situation was special. A fireball appeared in his left hand that was much larger than normal, a layer of red light flashing across his staff causing it to grow half a fold once more. The spell was enchanted with a two-grade increase in level, enhanced damage, and increased range. This was approaching the limit of most grade 6 spells, not far from a grade 7 Burst Fireball.

The bundle of flames more than half a metre wide whizzed out across a hundred metres, shooting towards the escaping great mage. He let out a strange scream, putting up as many barriers he could in a flash. The many waves of fire forced him off his horse in a sorry state, most of the cavalrymen caught in the explosion dead, but he had preserved his own life.

Richard's expression grew even darker. It was at that moment that two silhouettes shot out like lightning, heading straight for the great mage. The Shepherd of Eternal Rest and Annihilation penetrated his body at the same time.

One of Duke Grasberg's subordinates, great mage Senth, had died in battle.

Waterflower and Phaser separated after an exchange of sharp glares, entering the chaotic battlefield. A warzone filled with horses was simply a paradise; there was just far too much room to dodge under the beasts' bellies.

A cleric was trembling continuously as he waved his sceptre, but he had long since run dry of power. He couldn't cast a single healing spell, only able to hide behind his paladins. However, the rear was not a safe spot; the enemy could be anywhere.

The cleric suddenly felt a chill in his chest as a blade emerged from his heart. He turned his head with much difficulty, wanting to see his killer, but only managed to turn halfway before he slowly drooped down.

Level 10 cleric Bayenne of the Church of Ceres had died in battle.

On another side of the battlefield, Waterflower was taking small steps towards her target as guard after guard fell at her hand. The target was a middle-aged man with unwavering determination, currently leading ten-odd knights in a bloody battle to firmly block the advance of the humanoid drones. Every swing of his huge sword left a huge wound on the humanoids' bodies, but even with their chests caved in these battle units still fought to the death.

The knight suddenly sensed a great danger, quickly turning his head. He caught a glimpse of a girl soaring through the air, her body basically parallel with the ground as she flew towards him without a sound. The longsword in her hand was covered in a dense black aura, moving at an incredible speed.

Shock flashed in the middle-aged knight's eyes, the energy that had started fading away rising once more to meet this extremely dangerous enemy. However, it was too late; the light in his eyes suddenly dimmed as a thick line appeared across his throat, fresh blood spraying out the neck!

Waterflower stretched out a hand and pressed gently on the knight's head, borrowing this strength to soar into the sky. She flipped through the air a few times, quickly making it over ten metres away as she entered the chaotic battle once again. The knight's head rolled off his body.

Golden Eagle battalion commander Sir Booker, a level 15

swordsman, had died in battle.

When Waterflower and Phaser took out another great mage and priest respectively, wiping out all magic on Odom's side. This was the cornerstone of victory in a war.

Odom fell down with a loud crash. His flail flew out even in his last moments, crushing two of Richard's warriors. Almost no blood flowed out on the ground; the incomparably intense battle had run him dry. Even in his last moments, his aura still flared.

Richard dismounted and walked over, stopping by Odom's body for a few seconds as he stared deeply at this admirable and fearsome enemy. He then returned to the battlefield once more; dozens of enemy soldiers were still ignoring the command to surrender.

## Book 3, Chapter 73 - Grit And Steel(3)

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All the surviving enemies were a part of Odom's heavy cavalry, violent and bloodthirsty with the spirit of true knights. They would fight to the end unless ordered to stand down, and the only one who could do so was already dead.

Richard pulled on the reins of his warhorse, raising his hand and ordering the surrounding warriors to retreat. The shield wall completely encircled the last dozen or so knights, the blood of humans, barbarians, and drones covering the entire area. With the horses all dead, these knights stood back to back as they faced these enemies that were nearly a thousand times their number.

"Surrender," Richard gave them one last chance, but the only reply he got was spit on the ground right in front of him. He sighed, giving out one last telepathic order. A sea of axes drowned out the knights, ending the battle.

He stopped his warhorse atop a small hill, silently looking down as his soldiers cleaned up the battlefield. The dead were still in the same positions as right before they passed, blood staining the land. Odom's body had been carried out and laid flat on the field, his armour filled with dents and burn marks. The twenty to thirty crossbow bolts all over his body were perhaps the best descriptors of this battle. Richard's enchanted crossbow bolts were something nobody, not even a saint, was supposed to be able to withstand easily. However, Odom had taken twenty of them before he fell.

The busiest of the lot right now were the priests and clerics. Their powers were the only chance for many of the wounded warriors to survive, so Flowsand, Kellac, the other fallen clerics and even Caesar were treating them tirelessly. The great power of the Church of the Eternal Dragon was clearly evident.

Io was stunning as usual, his powers seemingly not depleted at all. He walked between the wounded, sacred light flowing out of

his palm. Countless soldiers looked at him with hope glittering in their eyes like he was a god amongst mortals.

Richard didn't feel as angry anymore.

When he received word about the defeat, Sir Hogan turned his troops around without a second of hesitation, ordering the retreat. Richard's desert warrior cavalry finally showed itself, all unwounded. They surrounded the pure infantry soldiers, perfectly kiting around them like proper horseback bandits. However, Old Hogan led his troops calmly without allowing any disruption to their formation. Although they left hundreds of their comrades behind, they eventually made it away.

The battle with Odom had been more difficult than Richard had expected; he had to allow his soldiers to rest for a while after the battlefield was cleaned up. Although the broodmother's drones did not care for wounds, they were still out of energy; will alone was not enough to overcome the body's weakness.

During the entirety of Richard's trip back to Norland, the broodmother had constantly been creating the elementary humanoid warriors in the bloodstained lands. There were now more than 500 of them, with ten being elites. With the armour Richard had given them, they were instantly worthy of Odom's envy.

Once they came out of hiding, the broodmother's drones had completely flipped the tables on the battlefield. 500 humanoids, a large number of throwers and 200 barbarians gave Richard a definitive upper hand in terms of soldiers, while the chasm between their spellcasters and powerhouses was even wider.

Richard had lost about 100 men with 200 more injured, collectively killing 700 enemy warriors. Outside of a minuscule number of deserters, almost all of Odom's cavalry had been destroyed. On Richard's end, the many clerics on healing duty would ensure the wounded warriors were fit for battle with a few

days of rest. Although there were still more than a thousand soldiers in Fontaine's lands, they had completely lost their elite forces.

The soldiers that had been a part of the intense battle entered the land of dreams at midnight. After recuperating in his tent, Richard began work on a rune. He had sufficient materials and many designs, so the only thing he needed was time.

Richard held his breath as the pen entered his hand, carefully carving the first line onto the hide. The line was long and crooked, covering more than three metres if straightened out, so it was difficult to complete in one go. However, this line was critical to the rune's design, directly affecting the energy absorption mechanisms.

His hands remained stable as a rock, the deviation no more than a millimetre. This was a level of precision no normal person could achieve just from training, even more so when one also had to maintain a steady flow of mana at the same time.

Richard succeeded on the first try.

He heaved a sigh of relief, it was a well-drawn line that completed a third of the rune. He gently lifted the pen, preparing to change its ink; it had three different compartments that were completely isolated from each other, and the owner could select any one to draw with. This solved the age-old problem of inks being contaminated.

Richard's heart warmed at the sight of the pen, thoughts floating to Flowsand. However, that immediately led to the battle priest Io who shone as bright as the sun.

Richard suddenly sensed the air being lit up by his breath. He felt like Io would be beside Flowsand right now. What was he doing there? And where was Flowsand?

The second question didn't take much to answer. All the

wounded warriors were already treated, so Flowsand had to be in her own tent. In that case, was Io there with her?

“No way!” Richard tried to convince himself. However, a deep voice rang out in his mind, ‘You’ll find out when you go check.’

‘I trust Flowsand!’ he exclaimed in his heart.

‘You barely even know her,’ the voice wouldn’t give up.

“Get lost!”

‘Why are you losing your temper? If you want to prove me wrong, just go check. You’re afraid of finding him there, aren’t you?’

Richard fell silent, putting the pen down. He wasn’t in the right mood to continue runecrafting, and he knew that he would fail even if he tried. This was the first time in his life his work had been stopped by emotion. His success rate was high, but so was the quality of the materials. Every failure wasted thousands of gold; every single coin was valuable right now.

He whipped out the Life’s Bane blueprint, scanning through it once more. This was a rune close to perfection, not as straightforward as a normal grade 3 structure. The most difficult part was an array that seemed to be designed to link two of the same kind into one entity.

This array was extremely difficult to create, and he had never seen any such thing in another grade 3 rune before. However, it wasn’t a huge challenge; as long as his condition was good enough, he would be able to succeed within five tries. The issue was with his mana pool; he would need to be level 15 at minimum, able to cast grade 8 spells.

The design of all the other parts was wonderful as well. Richard was inspired by every nook and cranny of this rune.

However, tonight was not the night to do anything. Richard stared at the blueprint for over ten minutes without processing

anything. ‘A lot of things could happen in this time,’ the voice rang out incessantly in his mind, ‘You might be able to stop it if you go now.’

‘You’re still not going? It’s okay if you’re interrupted.’

‘Even if it won’t make any difference if you go now, what about the second time...’

Bam! Richard threw the blueprint onto the table, standing up. If he didn’t go take a look, he would just waste time.

When the tents were being pitched, Richard had specifically had separate tents prepared for Flowsand, Io, and Kellac. It was normal procedure for powerful mages and clerics to receive special treatment, so these orders were quite ordinary. Gangdor and Olar, in charge of logistics, had never disappointed him when it came to executing on such things.

But...

Richard recalled that Flowsand had a faint smile on her face when she introduced Io. Thinking it over again, there were a lot of hidden meanings in that; never before had he heard a priestess call a priest her partner. Io’s expression floated into his mind once more, the expression of someone bright as the sun looking down on him. Thinking back to it, he saw a deep sense of animosity in those eyes.

Io seemed to have endless power, turning the battlefield into heaven. He shone so brightly that Richard felt like his own status as a royal runemaster meant nothing. As for other things like appearance, they weren’t even on the same playing field.

In all his life, Richard had only felt like he lost in appearance to two people: Nyris and Io. Nyris was a true friend, his appearance enchanting, but Io was different. The battle priest was majestic, someone extremely attractive to women. Even an elf like Olar looked like a peasant in comparison.



Richard finally decided to head out of the tent. He would start drinking if he continued to stay, and the outcome of that would be completely unknown. However, he returned the moment he took a foot out, grabbing his sword before heading out once more.

He ran into Gangdor the moment he left the tent, almost bumping into the man. Just as Gangdor was about to joke about the matter, he sensed something was off. Richard seemed like he was about to kill someone! His smile faded away, “What’s the plan for tomorrow, boss?”

“Send Odom’s body back for now,” Richard answered thoughtlessly, “We’ll group up and attack Twilight Castle later in the day.”

Gangdor scratched his head in confusion, “Won’t that give them time to escape?”

“Let them.”

Gangdor simply nodded in answer to that, turning around to look for Olar so they could discuss plans for the attack. Before he left, he looked at Richard’s sword for a moment as various thoughts sprang into his mind.

## Book 3, Chapter 74 - Your Future

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Richard wasn't aware of what he was doing; he didn't even know how he had chased Gangdor away. The inner voice was so distracting it overpowered every thought of his.

"I just wanted to take a few rounds around the campsite..." he muttered to himself, taking a few big swigs of liquor.

It was only when the familiar burn entered his body that he noticed the bottle in his hands. He couldn't remember where it had come from; he didn't have a habit of keeping any alcohol on his person, and there wasn't any in the tent either.

It was a bad idea for the general to be drinking in the camp. Mindful of such details, Richard wanted to throw the bottle away. However, giving it some thought he ended up stuffing the thing back into his clothes and moving on. His sword's tip dragged across the floor, the scabbard bumping every few steps as it sparked against the little pebbles on the ground.

In another part of the campsite, Gangdor and Olar were discussing the attack on Twilight Castle. Gangdor suddenly felt thirsty halfway through, but found nothing when he reached into his clothes. His flask was gone...

Tainted by all the bloodshed, the battlefield was extremely cold. However, there was still a humidity in the wind that made it seem like day. Richard's eyes scanned across the guards, the stable, and the bonfire before stopping on the tents not far away.

Unknowingly, he ended up in front of Flowsand's tent.

The place was still lit, meaning Flowsand wasn't asleep yet. However, two silhouettes revealed themselves on the wall. Richard was sent into a stupor, freezing on the spot. His inner voice faded away.

The tent's flap was pulled open and Flowsand popped her head

out, waving to Richard. “Alright, that’s it for today. You may head back,” she said to the one within.

“Sure.” Indeed, the voice that rang out belonged to Io!

Richard felt a sudden chill down his spine and in his heart, the grip on his sword tightening. Io walked out and smiled in his direction, returning to his own tent. The smile was bright as usual, but to Richard it carried meaning. He almost drew his sword.

Forcing himself to resist the temptation, Richard walked into Flowsand’s tent and sat down, fixing his gaze on the tent’s walls. If he made any further eye contact with Io just now, he knew he wouldn’t be able to control himself anymore.

Flowsand lowered the flap and turned around, sitting in front of him, but she couldn’t read his expression. She noticed that he was expressionless, staring at the wall as though it was a blueprint for a grade 5 rune. She laughed and waved in front of his face, finally getting his attention.

“You were looking for me?” she asked, a tinge of humour in her tone.

“No... It’s nothing, I was just making my rounds around the campsite,” Richard stuttered out. He reeked of alcohol as he spoke, causing her smile to grow more obvious.

“Making your rounds? That’s not something you should do. What were you checking on?”

Faced with such a question, Richard was at a loss for words. “I’m the general,” he tried to pretend there was nothing wrong, “Isn’t surveying the troops a part of my responsibility?”

“No, it’s for Gangdor and Olar. Actually, any of your followers could handle it,” Flowsand said without hesitation.

Richard was left speechless.

Flowsand immediately turned serious, “Oh right, there were a

few mistakes in your command today. Some of your decisions weren't very appropriate."

Richard knitted his eyebrows; he knew he hadn't been up to par. Just as he nodded in agreement, however, Flowsand added, "Io was the one who mentioned this."

Richard froze. He had just agreed, so there was no turning back. He looked on unhappily, asking coldly, "Isn't Io just a battle priest? What does he know about tactics?"

"A battle priest from the Church of the Eternal Dragon. This is part of his domain," Flowsand answered.

He felt a ball of anger filling up within him, smirking, "Let him conduct the next battle then!"

"He said the same..." Flowsand stopped the moment she saw Richard's expression.

Richard suddenly felt at ease, putting both hands on his sword as he filled in, "He wants command? And what else?"

The cleric stuck her tongue out and leaned closer, "Alright, alright! I just wanted to make you a little antsy. I told him already that you're an almost-perfect tactician. We were just reflecting on the battle and found a few parts that could be improved. I know this isn't your normal standard."

Richard remained silent.

Still feeling something off, Flowsand leaned into his arms and touched his face, "The clergy needs to have good synergy with the commander; that is the only way for them to reach maximum potential. A minute's difference in large buffs or dispels could affect our odds tremendously!"

Richard sighed, gently stroking her head as he finally relaxed.

"Also, Io feels like you're currently too weak. A level 12 mage is insufficient to control these men."

Richard tensed up again. ‘You mean insufficient to control a battle priest, right!’ he almost said, exerting all his willpower to keep himself quiet.

Flowsand didn’t seem to understand his reaction this time, pulling him up and kicking his sword into a corner. “We can take care of that! Come, I’ll teach you some melee combat skills from the Church. They’re very powerful.”

Richard didn’t need her words to know that the Church’s combat techniques were truly powerful; he had experienced them himself. Before he knew it Flowsand was suddenly upon him, exerting force to send him flying up. He flipped around a few times in the air, falling to the ground face down!

She pulled him up and repeated the action once more, this time describing the key part of each move in detail.

Neither of them knew how the time passed.

Deep in the night, Richard had fallen countless times. He was aching everywhere, leaving her tent with heavy, tense footsteps. In contrast, Flowsand was filled with energy, even waving goodbye to him before pulling down the flap. He was left with conflicted feelings, only recalling after he was back in his own tent that he hadn’t found a good opportunity to ask an important question.

What was her relationship with Io?

Flowsand was still awake in her tent. Her face rested in her palms, nobody knew what she was thinking, only that she snuck in a smile every now and then. The light formed a halo around her face.

“You... I won’t be a part of your future...” she muttered to herself.

.....

The next morning, a loud alarm woke all the soldiers up from their sleep. The troops gathered quickly as Richard mounted his

horse, seeing Io in the distance; the battle priest was still very eye-catching. Sparks almost flew from their eyes when their gazes met.

An afternoon's march brought them to the Twilight Castle. The Grasberg flag was flying atop the castle, but there were few soldiers guarding the place. The gate wasn't opened even though Richard's army was sighted.

"So I was right," Richard smiled as he talked to his followers, "Zim's troops really did retreat."

All of Duke Grasberg's subordinates had retreated overnight, taking along the corpse he had sent. Earl Layton would definitely push all of the blame onto Sir Hogan when they returned, trying him for abandoning the battle without a fight. In fact, Old Hogan had made the right decision; if he hadn't insisted on the retreat, all 1,000 of his soldiers would have fallen at Richard's hands.

Facing more than 600 level 9 warriors, the thousand level 3 soldiers that weren't even prepared would have been tired out instantly, massacred without a care. However, there was a different angle to this. Odom had died on the battlefield, but Hogan hadn't even tried to help him out. The more the scars on Odom's body, the faster Hogan would die.

This was the exact reason why Richard had sent the corpse back. With his bird's eye view from the bats, he already had a decent understanding of Hogan's style of command. This knight was the kind of opponent he hated most; he would rather fight an intense battle with someone like Odom and tangle with Hogan. Even though all his remaining soldiers were rather weak, he could still make use of Twilight Castle to inflict a significant amount of losses.

"This is Baron Fontaine's land!" an officer shouted from atop the walls, "Personal armies without clearance will not be allowed entry! Leave now, you are violating the barony's laws!"

Richard narrowed his eyes, turning to one of the guards nearby,

“Tell him that some thieves snuck into Twilight Castle and we’re here to investigate.”

The soldier shouted Richard’s voice out loud.

The officer grew furious, taking a step forward and pointing at Richard as he shouted back, “This isn’t your backyard! How dare a mere frontier knight create a nuisance on the Baron’s land?!”

Richard didn’t even want to bother with the man. “Olar.’

The elven bard pulled on his bow, sending an enchanted arrow straight for the officer’s chest. The officer was shocked, quickly snatching a shield from the guard beside him to block the attack. The arrow pierced the shield, but it lost its angle and only managed to pierce the man’s shoulders.

Richard looked at Olar and shook his head, “You need to get more practice. How could you miss such a useless fellow?”

“Yes, my Lord!” Olar felt guilty. The officer had only been level 8, but his reactions were very quick.

Richard amplified his voice, talking to the guards on the wall, “Tell Fontaine or his mother this: don’t let us in, and I’ll attack the castle. I don’t have time to waste with you lot!”

## Book 3, Chapter 75 - Bloodstained Highway

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Richard didn't wait for an answer to his threat, having Gangdor and Tiramisu lead a troop of humanoids to take over the key areas of the castle. A lot of attention was paid to the ballistae; although he was confident that Little Fontaine couldn't afford enchanted bolts, it was better to be cautious.

As the group prepared to set off, Richard suddenly felt a burning gaze wash over him from the side. He turned over to find Io glaring at him, something that caused his emotions to surge once more. He almost wanted to go with Gangdor amongst the first batch to enter Twilight Castle, the words were even in his throat, but he managed to push it down. He was a mage, and more importantly the general of the army. It was a venture in foolishness to join the vanguard.

Just as he was feeling glad that he hadn't been overtaken by jealousy, Io suddenly spoke up, "Let me go in with them."

Battle priests had many methods to save their lives. Richard was in no position to refuse Io, but for some reason the decision caused him to feel awkward. Even the joy of taking over Twilight Castle without bloodshed faded away.

Half an hour later, the castle was in Richard's grasp. Fontaine's remaining forces did not seem to have any reinforcements, so there was basically no obstruction to Richard's entry. Truth be told, the defenders had already lost all morale the moment Earl Layton withdrew.

Richard looked through every corner of the castle, not letting go of any hidden rooms or cellars. One thorough look allowed him to memorise everything; if someone wanted to use Twilight Castle to defend against an attack from him in the future, most of their locational advantage would be eliminated.

Richard saw many unexpected, "special" tools in the bedroom of Fontaine's mother. The Baroness had obviously enjoyed a



“fulfilling” time with the general who occupied this area, and it wasn’t willingly. At least, not from the beginning. Memories of the battle alongside the late baron surged into Richard’s mind, causing him to turn gloomy.

It took an entire hour for Richard to finish a trip around the castle. His subordinates had gradually grown used to such things, becoming more patient over time.

Once he was done, he met the Baroness and Little Fontaine in the Baron’s personal study. He took a seat at the desk, while the Baroness and her son sat at the seats normally meant for guests. They seemed to be quite reserved.

“Things haven’t been going well, have they?” Richard asked.

The young Baron stubbornly pursed his lips in answer, not saying a word. He seemed very biased against Richard, especially due to his status as a frontier knight. This seemed to be some form of arrogance that came from his noble status.

It was the baroness that was much more pragmatic, hanging her head low. She had seen Richard exploring the castle, and knew that he had definitely seen many things that could not be made public. Richard rapped silently at the seat he was sitting on, “Let me guess. Who was the one sitting behind this desk, Layton or Odom?”

Lady Fontaine really wanted to keep her silence, but she knew that would only anger Richard, “They’ve all taken turns, but Layton spent the most time.”

Richard smiled, “You’re smart, my Lady, but sadly not wise. If you had managed to hold on a little longer, things wouldn’t have ended like this. Being a faithful neighbour to me is much better than inviting a pack of wolves to your home. What terms did Zim offer to you?”

She sighed and accepted her fate, “That your lands would be

given to us. He would also give up some of his vassals' territories, enough to form a viscounty."

"A viscount! Even I'm tempted! However, did they follow through?"

The lady quietly began to weep. There was no need to answer the question; even the Fontaine armoury had been wiped clean during Layton's stay here, taken over by one of his trusted aides. Baron Fontaine had no idea what it was being used for, only obtaining a symbolic compensation in gold. It was so low that she wouldn't have been able to buy her jewels with it.

Richard called a soldier into the room, "Bring Caesar here."

Caesar entered the study only a short while later. He grew extremely emotional at the sight of his mother and brother, but stopped himself from jumping over to them. His family had opposed Richard against his father's final wishes, but he could not do the same. He had followed his father's commands, devoting himself completely to the Eternal Dragon and rooting himself by Richard's side.

Caesar was already level 5, a decent level for a cleric. Given his youth, it was definitely an accomplishment worthy of pride. Standing there in the study, his aura towered over his mother and brother.

Richard patted his shoulder, "Look, Caesar's already a level 5 cleric. It won't be too long before he becomes a full-fledged priest. Ah, Fontaine... I still look up to his wisdom. You lot should talk for a while."

Caesar seemed to grow very emotional, looking at Richard with a questioning look. Richard patted him once more, "Don't mind the time."

However, just before he left the study Richard seemed to remember something, "Baron Fontaine, I heard that your uncle

fell off a cliff while chasing some bandits. His life and death are unknown.”

“Is that so?” Little Fontaine answered drily, “What a pity.”

Richard smiled, pushing the door open and making his way out.

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The next day, Baron Fontaine announced that he would return to serving under the Direwolf Duke. He also announced an alliance with Sir Richard, punishing anyone with malicious intent against the knight’s lands. A week later, a fleet of vehicles full of construction materials left Twilight Castle for Richard’s territory. It was accompanied by a number of masons, including many of those that had originally been stolen from Richard’s lands. The Fontaine smithies were working at full capacity, preparing to produce over a hundred sets of high-quality armour and weapons every month for Richard.

Richard could finally continue to build his castle, but he left behind only a few dozen men to guard the place before returning to Bluewater. As long as all of his power was by his side, the territory would be safe. Anyone who dared covet his lands would immediately be annihilated once the army returned.

However, just before returning he sent an open letter to all the nobles neighbouring the Bloodstained Lands as well as those organisations with some power, inviting them to dispatch delegates to Bluewater Oasis to discuss a truly major event.

**The Bloodstained Highway Project!**

The plan was to gather the various noble families and merchant groups, cleaving a path through the Bloodstained Lands to the Ashen Plateau in the northwest, connecting the Sequoia Kingdom to the dwarven lands. The profits from the highway would be split based on the various forces’ investment in terms of labour and materials.

The plan would deal a fatal blow to the bandits and thieves along the corridor, but at the same time, it also affected the Iron Triangle Empire. Most smaller caravans took the long route through the Empire and paid exorbitant amounts of tax to avoid losing their men and goods, but this project would provide them a better alternative. Besides, Richard was planning to use this plan as an excuse to annihilate Red Cossack, a large merchant group that was under the Iron Triangle Empire's wing.

Many people had been invited to discuss the project, even Viscount Zim. The Highland Unicorn was no longer as troublesome as before, and even originally Richard hadn't placed too much importance on him and his backers. Any human nobles, large or small, liked to draw out altercations for a long period of time before concluding them; with the broodmother around, this was always an advantage for him.

In fact, war was quite effective at diplomacy with larger nobles. The loss of seven hundred cavalymen and Odom had dealt a heavy blow to Duke Grasberg, enough at least that he could not recuperate without a year's time. Earl Yatu, Zim's father, had been basically destroyed; his two great mages and priests had died in battle. The battalion commander of the Golden Eagles had been eliminated as well, destroying most of the Azure Deer Earl's strength.

The number of losses did not seem to be too large, but every death had been the death of an elite. Odom was an extremely useful powerhouse as well; level 16 beings were not called saints on Faelor for no reason.

Richard believed that even Duke Grasberg would have to put some serious consideration into challenging him once more. After all, the profits of such an endeavour were unknown but the potential losses were now obvious.

News spread faster than the wind on any plane with people on it. Odom's death was known throughout Bluewater by the time

Richard returned to the city, leaving all sorts of invitations filling his office desk when he got back.

Of course, he just swept all the papers into the wastebasket with his sword, holing himself up as he awaited the arrival of the various noble delegates while crafting runes. On one hand, this was an extension of his constant diligence, but on the other, he was unwilling to see Io but didn't dare to ask Flowsand about it. Richard believed he had already asked a similar question of her that night in the tent, but she hadn't given him an answer; he would not ask a second time.

The Bloodstained Highway project was a byproduct of his extreme depression. He had thought himself crazy at first, but some careful analysis surprised him with just how feasible the idea actually was. He had thus put everything aside, perfecting the plan in two days. A depressed lunatic was always terrifying.

## Book 3, Chapter 76 - Toppled

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Flowsand came to look for Richard punctually every day after dinner. The combat techniques of the Church of the Eternal Dragon were actually full of mysteries, a few basic postures linking together to form endless changes. This was a true technique that was not based purely upon one's strength. Of course there was no way for a level 1 cleric to defeat a saint, but between two people of the same level and class these techniques would definitely help one survive.

Richard found that even with the secret swords of Silvermoon, his fighting technique lost out to Flowsand. He was not a match for her in an unarmed melee. Flowsand's body was essentially perfect, her great flexibility making every contact a wonderful pleasure. Over the several hours that they would fight, they ended up in all sorts of positions. Before, this would have led to a bout of intense sex. However, Richard had been training with her for an entire week but not touched her once.

The thorn in his heart would just not fade.

However, Flowsand was just unwilling to explain. Even if Richard occasionally slapped her rear, she still let it go. Eventually, he just ended up going quiet. Elena's arrogance had been bred into his very bones; he would not ask again and again.

Bluewater hadn't been quiet in all this time that Richard had hidden himself away. The delegates of all the nobles arrived at the city one after the other, meeting with Richard's followers. Olar had been considered a pretty good diplomat once, but now his glamour was completely overwhelmed by Io's.

The battle priest had impeccable looks and bearing, his power great enough to subdue most. In a world of gods like Faelor, offending a priest was much worse than offending a mage. However, Io never took pride in his looks and power, instead being

humble with every person he met, be it a regular soldier or a title noble. Everyone that met him felt inspired; it had just been a week, but he was already the most popular person in the entire oasis.

At this point, even Richard's followers could see the problem. The priest evidently wouldn't heed Richard's orders. However, Io was just like Flowsand; strictly speaking, they weren't really Richard's subordinates. None of them could say much about it.

Almost everyone in Bluewater liked Io, but a fair number of people didn't treat him well either. Tiramisu was the most obvious, seemingly ready to throw him into a cauldron and make soup from him. Waterflower never smiled in front of him; in fact, she had told him to scram when he once invited her to dinner in front of everyone.

Phaser's eyes were always on Flowsand. The special unit had been hiding at the side once when Flowsand left Richard's room. In the end, a soft but powerful hand covered her eyes that were radiating bloodlust and dragged her off.

Only after they were a hundred metres away did Waterflower throw her to the ground before disappearing into the darkness. "Don't interfere," she left behind icily.

Phaser had been left where she was, wondering hard. However, that night had somehow smoothened the relationship between the two greatly.

Every night after Flowsand left, Richard would stand by the window as he watched the starry sky, asking himself what he should do.

He was seventeen years old, a time filled with confusion. This was the same age when Gaton was paying Elena's bills, brushing horses in foul-smelling stables so her party could drink...

It took ten days for him to finally walk out of his room, tossing three runes to Gangdor. The price was Gangdor taking him out to

drink him unconscious. Halfway through, he vaguely felt like there were a lot more people around. Waterflower, the elven bard, an old man that might have been Kellac, and a tall, fat figure that wasn't human.

.....

Richard only woke up when the sun shone on his face. He moved a little, but was immediately assaulted by a splitting headache. Memories of the previous night were slow to come; he only remembered that he had pulled Gangdor out to go drink and nothing else.

He groaned as he struggled out of his bed, washing his face with cold water to ease the hangover. His eyes landed on the worktable, realising that the three completed runes had disappeared to leave behind only an incomplete Guardian of Life. He thought about it seriously, remembering that all three were for Gangdor. They had likely been handed over to him already.

“This is bad!” he hit his own forehead in vexation, “Why did I drink last night, and so much at that?”

He truly regretted the time he had lost. Had he been in a good state, a grade 2 rune like Guardian of Life could be completed in three nights. Grade 1 runes would only need two nights at most. Every night was exceptionally important to him; the path to the top was paved with every minute and second of hard work.

He dressed up and walked out of the room, standing on the balcony. The cool morning breeze made him feel much more comfortable.

Loud cheers were ringing out in the distance, pulling his attention. He found two figures fighting at the training grounds.

One was Gangdor, while the other was Tiramisu. The two were colliding head-on, dull thuds making it all the way to Richard's balcony. He could even feel the wood underneath his feet shaking.



Gangdor and Tiramisu's hands were entwined as they wrestled. This was a competition of pure strength with no shortcuts, but the difference between the two races was enormous. Even a sturdy adult human was no match for an ogre child; this wasn't a contest on the same playing field. On top of that, although Tiramisu was a mage his physique was exceedingly powerful. He also had a standard strength rune on him.

This wasn't supposed to be a competition at all, but Gangdor's muscles flexed as he managed to actually repel the ogre! Without being suppressed in terms of strength, the cunning Gangdor who had survived the Archeron death camp had an overwhelming advantage.

He shouted loudly as his front leg hit the ground, cracks spreading out around his foot. A matchless power surged into his arms as he actually raised the ogre mage off the ground! Gangdor spun around until Tiramisu turned too dizzy to cast any spells, finally flipping him over into the ground. The collision was extremely heavy; even with the ogre's physique he was left groaning, unable to get up right away. Gangdor touched his bald head awkwardly, quickly reaching out to help Tiramisu up.

Richard's other followers had been watching from the sidelines, but none of them bothered with Gangdor's excited challenges. The brute eventually offered to take them all on at the same time, after which they immediately mobbed him.

Tiramisu cast quite a few curses on him right away, weakening him to an extent. Waterflower was quite quick, flashing behind him but in no hurry to actually attack. She instead shouted loudly, in a manner that seemed rather unnecessary.

However, this shout had a miraculous effect. Gangdor raised his arm to block subconsciously, giving her the perfect chance. She immediately rammed into his ribs, sending his huge body flying. Tiramisu and Olar took advantage of this and started beating him up, with even Zendrall secretly kicking the man a few times.

Phaser entered the battle stealthily, wanting to land a few attacks on Gangdor with her left hand, but the blade only scared Waterflower who quickly carried her away.

Watching all this from a distance, Richard smiled knowingly. Gangdor had just obtained three new runes to complete a set, a mutation of Savage Strike. With the defensive ability being raised from the original version, his might had risen considerably. However, it hadn't yet been a day and he was in a hurry to test out his newfound power. As expected, he managed to send even Tiramisu flying!

After that, he got impulsive. The consequence of challenging everyone at once was being brought down by the seemingly pure Waterflower. In that moment, even he had the urge to get into the field with them.

This morning seemed extremely beautiful, but Flowsand was missing. However, if she did appear, Io was sure to be by her side.

The slight smile on his face suddenly froze.

It was at that moment that a soldier walked behind Richard, informing him that Rolf wanted to meet him. Richard was slightly surprised, not understanding why the saint swordsman would want an audience with him at this time. He instructed the soldier to lead Rolf to the ground floor lobby, saying he would be down immediately.

Outside the gate, Rolf had his hands behind his back as he also watched the fight in the grounds. However, unlike Richard his expression was solemn, especially so when the rest of Richard's followers attacked Gangdor. Tiramisu's casting speed, Gangdor's powerful physique, Waterflower's own strength with that ram... it all left his eyelids twitching.

It left him wondering. Had he been the one under attack by those four, he would not be able to hold on for long. He couldn't even be slow with his escape, Olar was still around. The elven bard might

seem ordinary, but the combination of his warsongs and spells held unimaginable power.

It seemed like Odom truly had fallen at Richard's hands.

Richard took a few minutes to make sure not a hair was out of place on his body before going down to see Rolf. This was a basic form of etiquette between nobles, a minimal show of respect. He put on a smile the moment he entered the lobby, "Lord Rolf, to what do I owe this pleasure? Could it be that my breakfast is just more delicious than anywhere else?"

Rolf laughed, "Just in time as well! I haven't had breakfast yet."

This attitude was something to think about. Rolf seemed to be extra friendly today, something surprising. Richard still couldn't match up to the man in terms of strength or status. Still, he had his servants bring in a meal. It didn't take long for the two to finish a sumptuous but not exactly luxurious breakfast, after which Richard told the servants to leave. He then turned to Rolf, "I believe you have something to tell me?"

Rolf picked up his cup of coffee, softly blowing at the bubbles on top before tasting a mouthful. He then took out a little box the size of a palm and handed it to Richard, "I came here to gift this to you, my Lord." This was the first time the man had been so respectful in addressing Richard.

Richard opened the box only to find two broken fingers within. One was the middle finger of the right hand, the other the thumb of the left. Both had spider tattoos on them, with a pair of black crystal and jade rings that emanated a powerful magical aura. This pair rings gave the user a rather decent boost to their strength and vitality, and were quite famous as the Ivy of Charlotte. They were a symbol of the saint Phinbar of Red Cossack.

Richard carefully appraised the two rings before closing the ring, "Phinbar's dead?"

“His head was destroyed by my sword’s energy. Thankfully, he still left these two fingers behind. Hehe, without them he’d probably rather die anyway,” Rolf said with a chuckle.

Richard imitated Rolf’s manner, acting like a young noble who cared for little else as he whistled and said, “300,000 gold coins shall be yours, Sir Rolf.”

Rolf’s eyes blazed, “Sir Richard, could you... Exchange the gold for a more powerful rune?”

Richard immediately nodded in reply.

Rolf was slightly shocked, hesitating, “Thank you very much for your generosity, Sir Richard. I know that runes cannot be given out so flippantly; those runes your subordinates use should only be for those worthy of trust. I—”

“I trust you,” Richard interrupted his words.

“This...” Rolf was shocked and delighted, at a loss for what to say.

Richard smiled, “Since you have activated the third level of the War Construct scroll, we are family.”

Rolf’s eyes blazed at the mention of the War Construct scroll. “The divine might of the Eternal Dragon is truly indescribable!” he praised from the bottom of his heart.

Richard patted Rolf’s shoulder and laughed, “Wait until you have accumulated enough to make an offering to the Eternal Dragon. Then, and only then, are his divine grace and might truly indescribable!”

Rolf nodded solemnly, not minding the pat at all. Instead, he felt like it was only right for Richard to do so. He obviously knew there would be no end to the offerings once they began. However, so what? Who could resist such a temptation?

With Richard’s guarantee in hand, Rolf left with anticipation and

anxiety. Richard himself returned to his laboratory and sat in front of his desk, flipping open a diary before dipping a goose-feather quill in ink and writing down:

“My first steps have been taken in Faelor, and I’ve firmly rooted myself in this plane. However, as I look around, I find my allies to be bandits and thieves, robbers and murderers; desert warriors whose very nature is plunder, and liars, traitors, and heretics. These seem to be the only people I can use to topple the old world order.

“Is this the essence of planar war?”

## Book 3, Chapter 77 - Nightmares

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Richard's life seemed to return to normal once he sent Rolf away, the sky a dreary grey. There was no wind within his laboratory, the temperature perfectly constant.

He spread out the incomplete Guardian of Life rune, picking up his pen and slowly filling it with mana. The tip lit up slightly, but at the sight of the unstable lustre he shook his head and continued to increase his output. The light eventually stopped fluctuating, but he stared blankly at the incomplete arrays without starting a stroke for a long time.

An entire morning silently slipped through his fingers. Richard had only drawn two strokes, of which one had nearly been a mistake.

Thud! he slammed the pen on the table and walked over to the basin, casting a cooling spell on the water within. His control over the magic was exquisite, chilling it to just under the point where it would completely freeze over. He then poured the ice water over his head. Richard couldn't help but shiver. He stood there quietly, knowing he could not go on like this.

However, he had no idea of what to do. He raised his arm, looking at his long, slender fingers. The blessing of truth began to draw numbers on his digits, giving him a summary of their characteristics. He always felt calmed in this world of numbers.

.....

In that same moment, Flowsand was seated in her own room as she silently flipped through the Book of Time.

The pages were blank. She could see whatever she wanted with a single thought, but every page she flipped through was empty.

Io was leaning over the window, taking in the sunlight. His spotless white robes seemed eternally unsullied, the golden

patterns shining in the sun's rays to glisten with a sacred radiance.

He suddenly laughed, "Why do you do this to yourselves?"

"What do you know?!" Flowsand answered coldly.

His smile was as full of charm as always, "If I were you, I'd maintain some distance from myself."

Flowsand just flipped through a page audibly.

"Richard seems to be affected by this," Io said once more.

More flips sounded out.

"I can bet you he'll be fine tomorrow. However, he will eventually abandon you if you keep this up."

The book went silent for a moment before resuming.

Io did not say any more. He had conveyed what he needed to, and repeating his words would not do any good. Oh no, there was something else he had to tell Richard. He leant by the window, the corner of his lips revealing a confident smile.

Seventeen. An age where many wanted to walk side by side, but would eventually be forced onto separate paths. The blessing of wisdom could speed up many things, but there were some that could only be settled with time. Even clerics and great mages were no exception to this rule. The cleric had their own problems, but just couldn't say them out loud. Io knew this, but he couldn't say much either. He wasn't a newborn soul that had only been recently given life; his wisdom was broad and far-reaching.

Every heavenly guardian was an old soul who was given a mortal body through divine grace.

.....

Richard walked out of his room at dusk, a magic sealing box in his hands. His face was expressionless, the grade 2 rune completed and with much better effects than he had originally anticipated. Had Lunor seen the entire process, he might have suspected that

Richard was a homunculus created specifically to craft runes.

This rune was meant for Tiramisu. With it, the ogre mage who liked to crush enemies in the frontlines with his two-handed hammer would have a much higher chance of survival. Every rune he gave his followers was a tremendous boost to their power. He may not be able to create miracles himself, but he could build up miracle makers with his hands.

However, just as he was about to close the door to his room, his movements suddenly stiffened. He turned back to see a bundle of darkness gradually taking shape within the building.

A nightmare creature!

Richard had basically forgotten all about this. Right at the moment he had lost his focus, a nightmare creature had appeared before him once more! The nightmare panther had already left him in such dire straits, what would appear this time? Nightmare creatures were bound to grow stronger and stronger once they appeared.

The shadow in the room split into two, a slightly smaller one forming a two-handed axe that mysteriously floated in the air. The larger turned into a shadow warrior who reached out and grasped the large axe. The shadow warrior surveyed his surroundings and then stared at Richard, crossing the axe horizontally in front of his chest as he started radiating bloodlust!

This nightmare warrior was evidently unlike the panther that relied purely on instinct to battle; he was equipped with considerable intelligence and knew how to use weapons. That giant axe in his hands was glimmering like a black diamond; it didn't just look real, it had become real. Black smoke surged as armour condensed on the warrior's body, glowing with a similar lustre.

Richard's thoughts at this time were unknown. He suddenly tossed the magic box to the floor, his eyes revealing a crazed



expression as he silently grabbed Extinction from the door and strode towards the warrior. The scabbard flew off with a simple shake, smashing through the window to make it a great distance away!

He raised his right hand, holding the blade less than two metres away from the shadow warrior.

This wasn't just bravado. Richard had put himself in a position where he could use over a dozen of the battle techniques he had learnt in an instant. While Flowsand's techniques were taught for bare-handed fighting, there were many different ways to adapt them for swordplay.

A darkness flowed in the eyes of the nightmare warrior, his expression seeming complicated. He was in no hurry to attack, staring at Richard with those ethereal eyes as he took large strides towards him. This warrior seemed to be looking for weaknesses, showing an intelligence far beyond the level of the nightmare panther.

However, Richard was unwilling to wait. A blazing snort sounded as the hand on his weapon tightened, Extinction whistling sharply as he swept at the nightmare warrior. The giant axe in the warrior's hands immediately went vertical, blocking Richard's ferocious attack. The long dagger and axe collided, creating a rain of sparks!

Richard wielded the blade with both hands, footsteps constantly changing as he showered slashes at his opponent. His breath was like fire in that moment, the close combat techniques, Silvermoon's secret swords, and his bloodline ability linking under the blessing of wisdom to turn every slash into a lightning bolt!

His mind had blanked out. All he could feel was the blaze of his blood and an intense desire to just cut down this enemy more quickly, more viciously! Extinction carved out a hundred slashes in but a few moments, finally living up to the greatness of its name.

The room's window shattered completely, wooden splinters flying dozens of metres away. Extinction flew out alongside those shards, but one could see the tendrils of darkness wound around it with the naked eye.

A large portion of the nightmare warrior was gone, a terrifying hole in the location of his heart; the dangerous aura had faded away. Richard's hands were empty, a thin line on the right side of his abdomen leaking blood. The line suddenly erupted, revealing red and white flesh around a few pale ribs. Blood started to flow like a mountain.

"You're done for," Richard said calmly, his voice like a sleeping volcano. He took a step backwards and grabbed behind him, the nameless elven sword landing in his hands. A step forward and he practically fell into the warrior's embrace!

Surging moonforce drowned everything out once more, unleashing a calamity on the room. The battle ended amidst light and fire.

Waterflower was the first to appear at Richard's door, but all she could see in the room was chaos. Richard was knelt on one knee in the centre, using the elven blade to barely hold himself up. He had his back to the door, but she could already hear the sound of a liquid dripping onto the floor.

She trembled, immediately flipping through the air to land in front of him. She saw that Richard had a tight grasp on his lower abdomen, blood seeping out between his fingers to form a puddle on the floor.

The young girl was flustered, wanting to pull his hand to see his injury, but she was too afraid to do so. For the first time in her life, the young wolf hated herself for not knowing any healing methods. Richard was still firmly pressing on the wound, not daring to slacken his hold, but even so blood surged out from between his fingers.

An all-drowning bloodlust suddenly enveloped the room as the door shattered, Gangdor's voice ringing out, "BOSS! What happened to you?!"

Olar rushed in ahead of the brute. His response was very quick, immediately casting a lesser healing spell on Richard the moment he saw the situation. This was the most powerful healing spell he could cast; due to the limits of his class, he could only learn a standard healing spell at level 14.

The spell was right on time. Richard immediately huffed, his stiff body beginning to tremble. A dense holy lustre landed on him not long after, the light from Flowsand's Restoration.

Waterflower almost jumped at the sight. The appearance of Restoration meant Richard would be able to keep his life. Flowsand was waving her hands, her necklace flickering from the spell that had just landed on him. Having instantly cast the spell with the accessory, she quickly started a chant for a second spell of her own.

It was at this time that a pillar of divine light even more powerful than Restoration landed on Richard, this one coming from Io. While he was a battle priest, he was still high-level enough for his spells to be quite powerful. This Sacred Rite spell also had the effect of dispelling the residual effects.

Richard's body trembled as the holy radiance flowed into him. A few tendrils of darkness were visibly expelled from his body, taking out the divine lustre with them. He groaned in pain, but he was obviously much better now.

Kellac had rushed over by the time Flowsand's second restoration spell was cast, the two fallen clerics in tow. Experienced as he was, he cast his own healing spells after one look. The two fallen clerics weren't high-levelled, but they cast their own spells on Richard one after the other.

## Book 3, Chapter 78 - Hurts So Good

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A loud explosion rang out, a new hole appearing in the wall as Tiramisu poked his large head in. However, he was slightly dizzy from smashing the wall apart; his unfocused eyes made it obvious that he did not understand what was going on.

In the blink of an eye, healing spells from three clerics and two priests bathed Richard in divine light. Even if he wasn't as tenacious as he was, this clergy could bring a dead man back to life.

Io was the first to stop, shrugging his shoulders as he took a step backwards. Waterflower looked up immediately, glaring at him. The battle priest returned her gaze with a bright smile, in answer to which her eyes froze over. Her left hand reached for the Shepherd of Eternal Rest, her awoken bloodlust not held back in the slightest.

Io's smile did not change. He merely spread his arms open, "There isn't anything I can do anymore! Divine spells won't have much of an effect on him now."

But it was at that point that he seemed to sense something, his body stiffening slightly as the smile on his lips froze. A killing intent from a small distance away caused his chest to tighten, making him feel very comfortable. Io maintained posture while turning back slowly, just in time to see Phaser standing quietly a few metres away. Her robes were covering her entire body, revealing only the scarlet eyes. The gaze was meant for a dead man walking.

Richard suddenly coughed, pulling the eyes of Waterflower and Io. He started trembling, hacking repeatedly until he finally spat out a few lumps of black blood. One could still see traces of shadowforce wandering about on the surface, quickly dissipating into the air. He seemed to regain strength in his left hand once the blood was out of him, leaning on the elven sword and slowly

getting up.

Flowsand charged to Richard, looking him up and down. She glared at him after taking note of every wound, enunciating each word as she yelled, “Are. You. CRAZY?!”

The injuries may have stopped bleeding, but they had not healed yet. There were three terrifying wounds on Richard’s body, so deep that one could see fractured or even split bones. Even with excessive healing, Richard would take a few days to recover.

Shadowforce could be seen twining around the injuries, preventing it from healing quickly. The holy lustre of the divine spells had yet to disappear completely, still twinkling between his flesh and blood, but it could not dispel the black vapour completely. One would need a grade 9 divine spell to immediately remove the shadowforce in his body.

Richard flashed a relaxed smile that made it seem like these injuries were fake, “Just a nightmare creature. I’ve already destroyed it.”

Flowsand’s amber eyebrows immediately rose up, almost going vertical like Sharon’s were prone to, “Nightmare creature! Why didn’t you escape? There are hundreds of types of nightmare creatures and you can fight less than twenty of them! Do you think the Eternal Dragon will just ensure you’ll always be given something you can take care of or something? As long as you escaped, we could have destroyed it together! My timeforce is the bane of nightmare creatures!”

Richard smiled without giving her an answer, instead grabbing her hands and placing an item in his right hand on her palm, “This is for you!”

Having said that, he turned to Olar, “Help me with the cleaning here. I’ll go rest somewhere else.”

Flowsand was looking at her palm in a daze. Within it was a

sparkling black diamond with a tendril of shadowforce moving back and forth within.

Image Diamond. This was something that could only be solidified from a nightmare creature with a certain amount of power. It possessed shadowforce and gravity-warping powers, making it an extremely rare spatial material. It could be used to create either spatial equipment or tools that could affect gravity. Normally, any nightmare creature that could form this should be able to take care of Richard easily. Even she, with her fighting abilities, would be no match alone.

“AN IMAGE DIAMOND?! ARE YOU A LUNATIC?!” Flowsand shouted towards Richard’s back. However, he didn’t even turn around, merely waving his hand calmly, “Isn’t it taken care of already?”

Flowsand went quiet, not knowing what to say at that moment. She could only watch on as Richard walked further and further. Just as he was about to pass by Io, the battle priest suddenly looked to the side and whispered something to him quietly. Flowsand was still staring at the image diamond in her palm and didn’t pay attention, but two of Richard’s followers did.

The words had seemed very normal, “I’m level 13 now. I’ll treat you tomorrow so you can heal more quickly.”

The corner of Richard’s lips turned up in what could be considered a smile, and he proceeded further.

Phaser had just flipped up from outside, Annihilation that was her left hand drawn. However, Richard didn’t care much for the blade; he had already turned the corner in the corridor, walking far away.

All of his followers sensed his need for solitude, electing not to follow. While Flowsand was still staring at the image diamond in her hand, he had already left. She wanted to chase after him, but could sense a bit of estrangement projected from his back.

Flowsand gritted her teeth and was about to chase after him, but stopped after the first step. She looked all around her, only then realising the strangeness of the atmosphere. All of Richard's followers were stood in place like statues, not moving in the least, but the pressure in the room was rapidly decreasing. A dense bloodlust took its place, making it seem as though she had just stepped into a battlefield.

Tiramisu was jabbing at the horn rising from his shoulder repeatedly, while Gangdor cracked his joints as he stretched. Olar looked relaxed, but he had already retreated into a corner and crossed his arms in front of his chest. A few whistles and his warsong would begin.

Phaser didn't hold back at all, grabbing Extinction with her right hand as bloodlust flashed in her eyes. Waterflower drew the Shepherd of Eternal Rest, spreading her feet until only their tips touched the ground. She was ready to attack.

At this moment, all of Richard's followers were ready for battle! Flowsand instinctually grew vigilant; their poses indicated they weren't in the same camp as her.

Io leant against the wall, lazily hugging his shoulders while glimmering with sunshine.

The followers exchanged glances, exchanging a lot of information with their eyes. Waterflower's were incomparably fierce, and eventually Gangdor gestured that he conceded and allowed her to proceed.

Waterflower's right hand relaxed as the digits of the left tightened their hold one by one. The tip of her sword touched the ground and began to shake, producing a shrill cry!

The girl pointed at Io, "You! Hands down, stand straight! Or I'll chop them off!"

Io's eyes narrowed in extreme shock.

“Waterflower, what are you doing?” Flowsand asked with a frown.

The girl didn't pay any attention to her, instead lifting her sword. Phaser's eyes brightened, the cutting edge of a blade peeking out from her left shoulder. Gangdor clenched his fists, while Tiramisu's feet unconsciously rubbed the ground. Olar had also straightened, his former smile gone.

The clerics had no idea of what was going on. Kellac seemed to come to a sudden realisation, immediately taking a few steps back and leaving the room with his retinue. This was not a conflict they could be involved in.

Io finally smiled and stood up straight, spreading his arms, “Is this alright? There's no need to be so serious, right?”

Waterflower stared at Io like a wolf, speaking in a slightly hoarse voice, “We are not friends. Do not joke with us!”

Flowsand was shocked and angered, “Waterflower! I asked what you were doing?”

However, a wave of the girl's hands had returned the Shepherd of Eternal Rest to its sheath on her back. She took a look at Flowsand, turning to leave without a word. The rest of Richard's followers followed her out, nobody bidding Flowsand farewell. Kellac, who had taken the priests to the hallway, looked around silently and left.

Only Flowsand and Io were left amidst the rubble. Her expression suddenly went dark as she stared at the battle priest, “What's going on? Why do they want to attack you?”

“It could be a misunderstanding.” Stood in front of her, he was back to the sunny and relaxed demeanour he always had.

“It better be! Remember your status, and why I created you!” She then abandoned him, leaving the room by herself.

Io sighed once she was a long distance away, muttering to himself



in a low voice, “My status? Hehe, but that might change one day. You’re all far too young. Isn’t this just a matter of a few words to explain? Well, I’m not going to pass on the message for you.”

Having said this, he left in a leisurely manner. Phaser silently appeared a dozen metres away. She had heard everything, but no matter how much she thought it over she had no clue what he meant. Why did she hear this? Priests didn’t just speak to themselves for no reason.

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Richard arrived at a guest room and closed the door, picking up a random chair and sitting down before sighing. He raised his hand after a long while, revealing another image diamond within. There were actually two nightmare creatures in that attack, one being the warrior while the other was the axe.

He laughed and threw the diamond up, sending it in a high arc that dropped it crisply into a vase. Looking down, he saw the two gigantic wounds on his chest and stomach and actually reached out to poke at them. While the wounds had already been sealed by divine power, it still hurt enough for him to tremble. He suddenly smiled, expression slightly crazed.

This pain just hurt so good!

# Book 3, Chapter 79 - Something Must Be Done!

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The news that Richard had been ambushed quickly spread across Bluewater. Many influential groups sent representatives over to survey the situation, but Richard locked himself in his room and claimed he needed time alone to heal. Every new arrival saw his followers were in perfect condition, so they left in satisfaction.

Just as it approached dawn, Richard pushed his room's door open and walked out, tilting his head up to face the sky. The morning sun was slowly rising up. He squinted his eyes; this was the first time in the past few days he had even been out in the sunlight.

Another sunny figure entered his vision, that of Io. The battle priest always made sure to appear in certain places at certain times. Anywhere Richard could see or wherever Flowsand was, best if both were combined.

Richard smiled and quickly made his way down. Olar spotted him from afar, growing both surprised and happy as he asked, "Master! You recovered from your injuries?"

"It's only been one night, how could I heal so quickly? It still hurts a little," Richard said with a smile.

The elven bard inspected his master closely, but he could not understand how the youth who was in a daze just the day before had grown so cheery in a single night. Had he patched things up with Flowsand? Of course, Olar wouldn't dare to voice that thought.

Richard was unkempt; he hadn't shaved in a while, leaving a dense clump of facial hair on his upper lip. His scraggly hair clearly showed his lack of sleep.

"The nobles you invited are already here, and they wish to see

you now. Many from Bluewater also expressed their concern once they heard you were attacked. Sir Rolf, Mr. Devon—”

“Alright, alright! You don’t have to tell me about everyone!” Richard stopped Olar, “Invite the representatives to the Golden Warflag inn, I’ll share lunch with them. We can discuss the Bloodstained Highway afterwards.”

He had returned to his straightforward self, once more a leader who had an answer to everything. This was something that left Olar both alarmed and happy.

“Oh yes, Master!” the bard suddenly remembered something, “Viscount Zim has come to Bluewater personally.”

Richard’s eyes were narrowed into a death stare at the sunny battle priest in his line of sight. “Oh, Viscount Zim is here as well...” he answered inattentively, but suddenly realised something was amiss, “ZIM?! He’s here too? How many troops did he bring, and how far is he?”

With a potential battle coming up, he immediately grew serious.

“Only a hundred guards,” Olar answered with a strange expression, “He already found himself lodging in the city.”

Richard’s face warped in confusion at this news, “What is he trying? Does he want to give us more ransom? How many saints did he bring?”

“Only one...” Olar thought about it for a while before giving his own assessment, “I feel like the saint is only here as a bodyguard. After all, he did have to travel through the Bloodstained Lands to get here. If he was trying to make things difficult for us, he would undoubtedly be courting death with just one saint. Even though he isn’t all that bright, his parents wouldn’t let him do something so stupid. They already know Odom fell at our hands, how would they expect one saint to do anything?”

Richard nodded, “Makes sense. Find some time to arrange a

meeting with him; since he dares step into our territory, we need to treat him with some value... Wait!"

His eyes suddenly lit up, staring at Io who was not far away. The battle priest had just greeted Flowsand, whispering something into her ears. Even though they were a hundred metres away, Richard's blessing of truth immediately told him exactly how far apart they were.

Ten centimetres. The two were separated by exactly ten centimetres.

This still didn't cross the minimum threshold. However, Richard had seen Io hit this limit many times; what could it signify? His calm heart was set aboil once more!

However, this time, his train of thought was different. The entirety of the previous night, he only had one line of questioning in his mind. If his mother were in this position, what would she have done? What would his master have done? What would that man have done?

Elena's pride would make her walk away, never to return. The legendary mage would just take Flowsand and Io and feed them both to a dragon. Only that man's method seemed suitable.

Smack! Richard suddenly hit the elven bard, pointing at Io who wasn't too far away, "Did you see that creep? Damn him!"

"I saw it! Would you like for me to break his legs, Master?" the elven bard said with an overcast face.

Richard shook his head, "No, he did it on purpose! If he wants me to play it like this, I'll grant his wish. Go call everyone here... Call that Zim too! Tell him he'll miss a good show if he isn't here in five minutes."

Flowsand had noticed Richard and Olar in the distance, and she saw the bard suddenly rush off somewhere. It left her feeling like something had happened, but she was caught in discussion with Io

about the issues with Richard's army.

She hadn't shared the broodmother's existence with him, so she listened to him solemnly while trying to explain as best as she could. She told him about the specialties of each kind of drone, and how best to supplement their fighting style. Io was a battle priest after all, he was better in war than she was. As a priestess herself, she was mostly an expert when it came to sacrifices.

All of Richard's followers quickly gathered together, alongside the clerics and Viscount Zim. The Viscount had even come alone, displaying a rare amount of courage.

Richard took big strides towards Io and Flowsand, leaving everyone watching with bated breath for something to happen. They felt like this morning would be a good show.

Io felt something was strange as well, stopping his conversation with Flowsand to turn and face Richard with a confident smile. In actual fact, all of his concentration had been on Richard from the start.

"Hey! Level 13 battle priest!" Richard yelled from a distance away. His voice was loud enough for everyone present to hear.

Io's eyes flashed with a look of astonishment, but his radiant smile did not fade. "Level 12 mage!" he replied formally, "Good morning!"

Hearing such a bizarre reply, Flowsand's expression changed. She finally realised that she had missed something: the misunderstanding hadn't been with the followers, but with Richard himself.

Richard stroked his prickly stubble, starting to like the sensation more and more, "All of the noble delegates are here. We'll be starting the discussion on the Bloodstained Highway soon. This will be a real war; I hope you'll obey all my commands on the battlefield, not acting freely. I look forward to the display of a level

13 battle priest.”

Io smiled in reply, “What if I feel like my own judgement is better?”

Richard flashed a similarly radiant smile, not pretending to be courteous in the slightest, “That would be a foolish idea. Follow my orders.”

Io finally displayed his true colours, “Do you really think you’re a better commander than me?”

Richard stared into Io’s eyes, “In a battle of thousands, I don’t even need my own battle capabilities. I can destroy you any time I want.”

Io laughed, “As a level 12 mage?” He carefully enunciated the number, the double meaning only caught by a few. When Io had first appeared, he was just like Richard at level 12. However, he had quickly risen to level 13 while Richard remained at level 12 with no chance of advancing within the month.

As she heard this, Flowsand suddenly regretted giving Io a high power growth.

“A mage?” Richard laughed heartily, turning back to face his followers and Zim. “You want to know what my confidence is based on?” he asked loudly, “It’s based solely on the fact that I can bring victory after victory! I may not be a great general right now, but I am an excellent tactician!”

Richard waved his fist vigorously, “We have been through so many battles. Faced with similar numbers and opponents of similar levels, have we ever lost?!”

All of his followers started cheering loudly, as though they had been through many barrels of hard liquor. They had more energy than a riled up mob! Even Phaser started mumbling strange, incomprehensible words. It didn’t matter that nobody understood her; the words were fierce enough.

Richard turned around like a whirlwind and pointed his finger at Io's nose, "For what other reason? For the reason that I'm a runemaster, and a royal runemaster to boot. A runemaster who launched two sets at his first convention! Level 12 mage? What's that?!"

Io's expression started to sour, his smile now slightly unnatural. Still, he tried hard, to keep it on his face.

However, Richard wasn't done. His finger remained pointed at the battle priest, "I don't know who you are or what your position is in the Church. You're in Faelor, which means you are my subordinate. I'm giving you two choices; follow my instructions, or get the hell out! We don't need an aloof and arrogant master amongst us!"

"Richard..." Flowsand couldn't help but call out, but he only turned his finger towards her, "You better keep your mouth shut! This doesn't concern you!"

Flowsand was stunned. She had never imagined that Richard could speak to her this way. She also didn't understand why she subconsciously retreated and shut her mouth.

Io smiled, "Are those all the reasons you have?"

"No!" Richard responded, "I only have one real reason. I hate you! Don't think I don't understand your true intentions, and what your actions are leading to. You're not the only intelligent person in this world!"

"And?" Io asked, taking off his priest robes.

"And I really want to break your nose with one punch!" Richard threw his staff and blades to the ground one by one.

"How uncouth!"

Richard flashed a broad grin, "We Archerons have never been hypocrites! Let's get straight to the point; I have a problem with you, and today is the day I beat you up! What are you going to do

about it?”

Io looked at Richard’s stance, unable to control his laughter, “You want to engage in unarmed combat with a battle priest from the Church of the Eternal Dragon?”

“Richard, have you lost your mind?!” Flowsand said with an anxious look on her face. She was well aware that heavenly guardians were unlike ordinary clerics. They didn’t need to train to be skilled at combat.

Richard placed his forefinger on his lips, “This isn’t your place to talk!” Flowsand lost her voice once more.

“Damn it!” Waterflower said fiercely from the side. The young lady’s cry was quite ambiguous. Gangdor looked over in astonishment, but immediately averted his gaze once he saw her glaring at him.

“Fighting isn’t just about technique.” Richard stared at Io as he stretched out his left hand, gesturing to the battle priest with his index.

Io laughed, “You want to see who has the hardest fists? Alright then, here I come!” For the first time ever, his smile had grown stiff.

The battle priest took big strides towards Richard, moving like a meteor. The mage and priest finally tangled with each other in a flash, quickly displaying great skills that stunned the audience.

These fellows were spellcasters? Many who were watching had the same thought. Even Richard’s followers who were supposed to know him well were flabbergasted.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! The sound of fist hitting flesh rang out constantly, leaving in a sour taste in the mouths of everyone present. The mage and priest seemed to interweave, every strike spilling fresh blood. This wasn’t just a test of skill; it was a battle of willpower, determination, and endurance.



It only took a scant few minutes before both combatants saw red, scarlet blood spurting everywhere. Their surroundings were filled with blood, every drop a ghastly sight. Both of them were just bleeding far too much!

It was only then that Flowsand suddenly remembered that Richard was still wounded. Her face paled as she stepped forward, taking the Book of Time from her waist and turning to Richard's followers, "Take action! Put Io to the ground! I give you full authority to kill him if he resists!"

However, she was ignored. It made her feel like she had gone insane. What was up with Richard's followers? However, given the pace of the current battle even she didn't dare to rush in. Richard wasn't just displaying his combat skills; he was using moonforce!

The two men were starting to fight as though it was to the death.

BAM! A resounding thud suddenly rang out in the battlefield. Richard's head had moved forward at full speed, his forehead smashing into Io's. This was a move that purely tested whose skull was harder. Half the audience involuntarily shut their eyes.

Richard swayed around and took several steps back, his vision blurring. However, his rage was still immense; every breath of his was like a volcanic eruption. He spat out blood mixed with saliva, walking towards Io. His forehead had been busted open, blood flowing freely, but he tried his best to keep his swollen eyelids open and look past the curtain of blood. The opposing figure in the blood-red world still stood tall.

"You have such a thick skull, you bastard!" Richard cursed angrily, rousing his strength and saying bitterly, "Come on!"

However, he couldn't see Io when he raised his fists once more. The battle priest's face was filled with blood as he was strewn across the floor, completely unconscious.

After an initial bout of confusion, Richard realised that he had

won.

All of his pent-up frustration from the past few days had disappeared in a flash. He took off his shirt and threw it to the ground, showing off his well-defined upper body. He curled his arms to display his bulging muscles, letting out a bestial roar.

However, more eye-grabbing than the popping muscles that were rare for a mage were the large scars on his back and abdomen. All of Richard's wounds had been torn open, a faint yellow pus mixed with blood seeping out from the gashes. One could even see the fibres of his muscles moving around underneath the skin! The black smoke from the prior day's fight had faded a little, but it could still be seen loitering around the injuries.

However, Richard didn't seem to be in any pain at all. He waved his fists vigorously, roaring again and again.

Gangdor immediately ripped his own shirt off, revealing his hulking figure as he roared with laughter, "Boss, look! This is what real muscles look like!"

The most eye-grabbing display was Gangdor's pecs, looking like chunks of carved meat that could feed even the ravenous Tiramisu. He beat his fists on his abdomen and started singing a tribal song, the chest muscles moving up and down to the rhythm. The boastful display immediately silenced everyone.

Richard's face was filled with bruises, his eyelids swollen to leave only a slit for him to see through. He saw Gangdor's performance through the tiny hole, viciously flipping a middle finger at the brute, "You son of a bitch, you're stealing my thunder! Do you wanna die?!"

Gangdor laughed heartily, jiggling his pecs even more.

A sacred light softly landed on Richard's body, slowing down the bleeding of his wounds. The smaller injuries even started patching themselves up, and Richard turned around to see Flowsand quietly

flipping through the Book of Time while reciting a gentle incantation for her next spell. Her voice was very soft, almost as though she didn't want him to hear her.

Richard took big steps towards her, scaring her to the point of trembling. She almost stopped the spell she had nearly completed, acting as though she didn't see anything and shoving her head completely into the book. However, if one slowed down time, they would be able to see her body shaking harder with every step he took.

Richard took the final two steps to reach her side, spreading his arms and forcefully pulling her into his embrace. He leaned over, kissing her roughly. It was almost like he was eating her up! Flowsand was left with no choice but to interrupt her spell, tasting blood and sweat from Richard's lips. The kiss was very invasive; by the time Richard pulled back, her face was full of bloodstains.

"You are mine!" Richard said.

Hearing his overbearing proclamation, Flowsand suddenly gritted her teeth and forcefully struggled out of his embrace. A strong groan showed her disdain, but her hand still tugged quietly at the Waterdrop Necklace to send a healing spell in Richard's direction, even though it was no longer as useful. She was only appeased once the spell was cast, finally realising Io was still lying unconscious on the ground.

She sighed and opened the Book of Time. Io wasn't severely injured, curing him would be easy. However, Richard reached out and pressed the book down. "Marvin, Kars!" he called out with a raise of his head, "Come here! Carry him away and heal him, slowly."

The two fallen clerics answered immediately, lifting the battle priest and making their way towards the stairs. They weren't particularly proficient at healing spells, but they still had the skill to heal Io in his current condition.

“Master, are we really going to cure that fellow?” Olar whispered to him, “We should just drag him to the forest and cut him apart! Just like what happened to Erwin!”

Flowsand had heard everything from a side. She raised her eyebrows, about to explode, but Richard grabbed the back of her neck and forced her head away from the elven bard. He waved Olar away, “It’s fine! I won today, I don’t hate that fellow as much anymore.”

The elven bard seemed like he had more to say, but Richard stopped him with another wave of the hand, “I need to get some rest, don’t follow me.”

He turned around and limped towards his room. The pain had taken over his entire body, so intense that he grimaced with every step. Flowsand saw this and moved forward to support him without a word. He let out a long laugh in return, instinctively leaning against her.

Before he left, Richard suddenly saw Viscount Zim and sent a smile his way, showing off his bloodstained teeth. Zim recoiled in horror, almost falling onto his behind.

It was only after the two had vanished upstairs that the atmosphere down below suddenly changed.

“What do you guys think, will Master be able to rest?” Olar asked.

Gangdor stroked his chin, looking like someone who had experienced such a thing before, “Rest? I believe he still needs to work!”

“Yes!” the bard nodded in agreement, “He will be very busy!”

He felt a sharp wind buffeting his bottom the moment he finished the sentence. Having experienced Waterflower’s wrath before, he cried out before jumping up instinctively. However, he could never have imagined that the Shepherd of Eternal Rest

would be placed just above his head. His skull crashed into the blade's scabbard, prompting a stuffy groan before the bard swayed and fell down.

Waterflower snorted, her eyes staring daggers at everyone in the room. "He bumped into it on his own, didn't you all see?"

Zim was the first to nod his head profusely.

## Book 3, Chapter 80 - Accident

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There was no 'battle' in Richard's room, no work. He couldn't hold it in any longer when he stepped in, falling down the moment he crossed the door.

He had been severely injured during the battle with the nightmare creatures, only barely pushing through. All the clerics had saturated him to the limits with healing spells, but there were still many hidden injuries to his internal organs and bones. The wounds that had been split open could only be closed off, needing many days of healing and rest to recover fully. However, he hadn't waited a day before fighting Io.

This new battle hadn't just torn open all his external wounds; his internal injuries had worsened as well. He had put on a brave front in front of his followers, but when his adrenaline receded he couldn't take it anymore.

Flowsand sighed. Having fought by his side for so long, she naturally understood his physical conditioning. She didn't panic, carefully laying him down and casting Restoration mixed with a preservation spell. Even though his body couldn't absorb the divine power, wasting most of it, the two spells at least managed to stabilise Richard's breathing and send him into a deep slumber.

She sat down on a chair and rested her elbow on the desk, reminiscing about her past with Richard. An unstoppable fatigue suddenly crept in as she lost herself in deep thought, eyelids growing increasingly heavy as her consciousness faded into a restful sleep. The cold war with Richard over the past few days had actually taken a toll on her state of mind, leaving her tired beyond belief.

However, it didn't take long before Flowsand got up with a scream. She accidentally knocked onto a shelf behind her in the process, knocking a vase to the floor. The porcelain smashed into

pieces with a resounding crash, revealing a black glow.

Flowsand's heart shook. She stood up immediately to see better, and surely enough it was a black diamond rolling on the floor. She slowly exhaled, bounding over to pick up the gem. Upon closer inspection, she recognised it to be an image diamond.

She reached into a pocket, fishing out the image diamond Richard had given her. Two now rested in her palm, causing her to realise that Richard hadn't only fought a single nightmare creature that night.

"This is... Crazy..." Looking at the still-sleeping Richard, she couldn't bring herself to say anything else.

.....

Lunchtime approached quickly. Richard's magic clock started playing a melodic alarm, causing him to jump up immediately.

Richard shook his head with considerable force, only then realising that he had been on the floor but covered with a blanket. He saw Flowsand and flashed her a smile, turning towards the clock and exclaiming, "Damn it! I arranged to meet the nobles for lunch! Flowsand, come help me change!"

He had changed into a fresh set of clothes in a few minutes, but couldn't mask the bruises on his face so quickly. Even spells couldn't cover it all up, so he had no choice but to ignore it and make a dash to the lunch venue.

He had just taken his seat in the hall when tens of noble delegates entered in quick succession. Naturally, the highest-ranking amongst them was Viscount Zim. He didn't need any welcoming, making his way to Richard's side and sitting down without any prompting. Although Zim didn't express any shock, the other delegates were clearly stunned by the bruises on Richard's face.

Richard laughed merrily as he pointed to the wounds, "Someone tried to steal my woman, so I fought with him this afternoon.

These are just badges of victory!”

The nobles in attendance showed expressions of illumination, their opinion of Richard increasing considerably.

Fights for love were common amongst the nobility. For a great mage like Richard to be unafraid of fighting like a common soldier immediately turned him into a sympathetic figure. All these delegates were titled knights at minimum, revering the traditional romanticism of the aristocracy.

The actual meal took little time; after all, they weren't here for the food. Richard welcomed everyone and exchanged some pleasantries before bringing them to a command room with a map of the Bloodstained Lands.

“The Bloodstained Highway is a simple plan,” he got straight to the point, “We will start here and head west until we reach the Ashen Plateau, finding the dwarves. The primary goal is to act as a caravan, returning with the rich ores from the dwarven kingdom. Another level of reward will be to smash through all the obstacles in our way. Horse bandits, Red Cossack, Camp Kvensen, the Cracked Canyon, Blackflame Mountain... Anyone in our way we'll thoroughly destroy! The project will establish our absolute dominance in the Bloodstained Lands, wiping out any threat we may face and carving out a safe passage towards the dwarven lands.”

As they looked at Richard's finger tracing across the map, the nobles couldn't help but hold their breaths. This was a plan beyond madness! However, if it really could be executed, the rewards would be immense.

If all the nobles present could band together, this impressive feat wouldn't be impossible. However, it would exercise half of the nobles in the Sequoia Kingdom. It was almost as though the entire country was going to war.

With how important this matter was, even the nobles who had



thought Richard was a lunatic had sent their representatives to meet with him. They weren't necessarily there to join the fight, just to act as good neighbours. Who knew what direction the spear would be pointed once an alliance was formed. It wasn't like there was a lack of similar conspiracies in the past; just thirty years ago such a deep divide had taken place. These nobles were rendered speechless by such a crazy, enticing plan.

"Who will be leading the alliance?" someone broke the short silence.

Richard rested both hands on the meeting table, staring at him, "Me, of course. Do you have someone more capable in mind?"

A peculiar look appeared on the faces of many of those present. They knew Richard would want to lead this expedition, but they hadn't expected him to be so direct. It didn't seem like he had any plans to woo them over; there were no grounds for negotiation. This was completely unlike the traditional style these nobles were used to.

Although it seemed to be easy to suggest a better candidate, closer thought would reveal just how astounding Richard's widespread achievements were. He had dealt heavy to the forces of Duke Grasberg, completely annihilating Viscount Zim's powerful army and even killing Saint Odom. Any one of these feats would be worth years of bragging. Although these results weren't one of a kind, they couldn't be found by any of those present.

However, it was impossible ask for these nobles to give command of their armies to Richard willingly. The easiest parallel was with Salwyn's command of the battle against Sinclair. Every family sent out a company under the command of one of their own, following Salwyn's larger orders but doing what they deemed right in the end. These companies reserved the right to retreat when they saw fit.

Most of the nobles present wanted the exact same thing, for

Richard to only be a commander in name. He was a mere frontier knight; many wanted to put someone of more repute and status in the lead.

Richard's question was met with a momentary silence, but then it a surprising voice rang out, "I agree to let Sir Richard act as commander. I pledge 300 Golden Eagles, 400 Golden Sparrows, 100 heavy cavalrymen, and 2,000 footsoldiers to the expedition. The logistics and equipment will be taken care of on our end."

Zim's words immediately caused an uproar. It hadn't been terribly long since the Viscount had battled Richard, losing his entire army as well as a significant portion of his family's troops. Logically speaking, even if the Highland Unicorn wasn't a sworn enemy of Richard's, the two definitely couldn't be bosom buddies.

Zim's mere presence in Bluewater had been shocking in itself. Many nobles felt that if he wasn't trying to wreak havoc here, he wanted to spy on Richard and prevent him from forming an alliance against his family. Nobody expected him to be the first to respond to Richard's call. Not even the most seasoned of political veterans knew what was going on.

In fact, it wasn't just them. Richard himself was greatly surprised; his blessing of wisdom had no immediate answer for Zim's actions.

To him, the Viscount had always been a valuable enemy. Zim would definitely want to deal with him himself, and wouldn't care for benefits at all. This untameable fellow would effectively stop any secret alliances being formed against him; the nobles wouldn't want to become a target of both sides. He would thus be free to concentrate on the more open enemies.

It was very important for lords who were on the rise to have a clear idea of who their enemies were.

Of course, the Direwolf Duke's bestowal of a title had definitely put things into motion that Richard had yet to understand. The

enemies he faced were stronger than expected, the silhouettes of three earls slinking in the background. Fortunately, there hadn't been any changes needed to his plans.

## Book 3, Chapter 81 - Accident(2)

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Zim coming personally had been a very important sign, but muddled as he was in the issue with Io and Flowsand over the past few days, Richard had overlooked the signal.

He hadn't cared about Zim at all. With the damage he had dealt to Duke Grasberg's soldiers, there was nothing to fear unless the Duke decided he just had to eradicate Richard and mobilised the entire army. However, if Grasberg really did disregard everything, he didn't mind wasting a few months in the Bloodstained Lands. The Duke's enemies would be very happy for the opportunity.

Richard nodded at Zim as though they had some tacit understanding, sweeping his gaze across the remaining nobles, "If anyone else wants to enter the alliance, or has a better suggestion, or simply wants to leave, speak now."

With Zim leading the way, several of the delegates hesitantly pledged themselves to the alliance. Contrary to his expectations, Richard suddenly found himself with a thousand cavalymen and over 5,000 footsoldiers in his hands. That didn't even include his own troops! He really hadn't thought that highly of Zim's ability to rally supporters. The Viscount himself wasn't worth much, but the family behind him was huge. One had to consider who exactly the Highland Unicorn represented when he spoke.

A middle-aged noble cleared his throat and asked, "Sir Richard, what are the consequences of not joining the alliance?"

Richard shrugged, "Nothing. It's just that anyone who doesn't join will face the same troubles in the Bloodstained Lands as they always have."

"Trouble?" the man asked warily, "What trouble? Didn't you say your plan would open a safe passage through the Bloodstained Lands?"

“A safe passage for the families who join the alliance,” Richard responded.

“What do you mean?” the noble narrowed his eyes. Backing him was a powerful earl who had always been respected and flattered in high society.

“The danger of the Bloodstained Lands depends on who you are,” Richard explained patiently with a dangerous smile, “Take Red Cossack for example. Their caravans have been meeting with raid after raid in the recent past. For them, the Bloodstained Lands are far too dangerous.”

The middle-aged noble’s expression grew very ugly as he snorted, slowly sitting down. Richard’s meaning was very clear; it was okay to not want to join the alliance, but then these families would be attacked whenever they entered the Bloodstained Lands. Where the attack came from was not important; it was only a matter of minutes for the troops under someone who managed to rise in the Bloodstained Lands to turn into mounted bandits.

This was not a violation of any laws, nor could it even be considered a threat. If they didn’t contribute to the alliance, Richard naturally had no obligation to them. Rights always corresponded to obligations.

Now that they knew the rules of the game, many more started expressing their desire to join the alliance. Richard’s cavalry grew to 1,500 strong and the infantry to 10,000! He was left with no choice but to limit the number of footsoldiers the later entrants contributed, adding a level and equipment requirement.

The Bloodstained Highway project needed an elite, manoeuvrable troop, not a large but mediocre army. Richard couldn’t bring himself to grow any happier. He glared at Zim, but the fair Viscount who seemed to have grown even rounder over the past months shot back a smile that had a hint of flattery. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

He had indeed planned to complete the Bloodstained Highway, but he didn't need so many troops or the support of so many families. His own allies and the broodmother would be enough for him to open a passage to the dwarven kingdoms, although it would take a lot of time. The only danger was the political threats once the benefits started flowing in. After all, he was still a lord of the Sequoia Kingdom in name.

He had gathered any noble of note here in consideration of the future. This meeting was meant to be an announcement of his expansion into the Bloodstained Lands, setting the foundations for a monopoly over the trade routes. This was a large piece of cake that he wanted to devour all by himself.

He hadn't expected Zim's sudden interference. The Viscount hadn't just turned his attitude around completely, also ruining his plans with such a peculiar method.

But now that he thought about it, the alliance was not as useless as he had assumed. His mind moved extremely quickly, his blessing of wisdom used to the utmost as he analysed the current situation.

This situation had its own advantages. It would give him a surplus of soldiers, allowing him to open up the Bloodstained Lands just that much faster. In addition, he was an invader from another plane. Once that fact was revealed, anyone who was deeply linked to him would inevitably be placed under suspicion.

Nobles could compromise, but this would be a matter of principle for those of faith. There would be no concession from the churches; any who collaborated would be sent to the gallows! This alliance would inexorably tie the fates of these nobles to his.

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The Bloodstained Highway Project had finally become reality after an afternoon of intense discussion. A total of six nobles had withdrawn from the plan, but all of the rest agreed to join the

alliance. The final size of the army was 2,000 cavalry and 8,000 infantry; alongside the reserves and the logistics that also came from the nobles, it reached 30,000 men in total.

Richard's own army was nearing 3,000 men by now, but he only devoted half of that number to the passage. He would receive a full quarter of the earnings from the passage once it was built, a number disproportionate to the number of troops he would provide, but Zim had insisted that the commander was the soul of the alliance.

In the eyes of many other aristocrats, Zim's enthusiastic support for Richard was an indication of his family's attitude. This was strange considering the hostility between the dukes backing them, causing those present to think their brains dead trying to figure things out. All the confusion had demolished any opposing voices, thus finalising the allocation.

Following the meeting was the banquet that nobles just loved, but nobody was in the mood to participate. Everyone chose to send a message back to their masters at the first chance they got.

In the dead of the night, Richard remained alone in his command centre to calculate the potential gains and losses of the plan. A success would net him tens of millions of gold, but the investment he needed to put in was just as high. The military expenses and the compensation paid for the soldiers' deaths would reach a shocking two million coins. If the plan failed, the expenses would rise sharply while the earnings would be nil.

The project originally needed a year to finish according to Richard's original plan, using the huge profits of the trips to and from Norland as well as the broodmother's neverending army to overcome the enemies. Success wouldn't only mean an invaluable trade route; it would solidify Richard as one of the core powers of the Bloodstained Lands.

However, his other purpose had been to pull out the thorns on

his path to power one by one. The route was not arbitrary, every region on the way holding minerals that Faelor hadn't realised how to use properly yet— such as the flamestripe stones in Blackflame Mountain— or places with divine idols and the like. Camp Kvensen had over ten tribes of varying sizes, while the ruins of Jubval held the legendary capital of the ogres.

The minerals would need to be distributed amongst the nobles, but those items with divinity were necessary for the broodmother; She was stuck at level 5 and could no longer rely solely on magic crystals and food to advance. Nobles and priests thought of the idols as trash to be burned.

The only problem was with a priestess like Flowsand being amongst a group of aristocrats. Thankfully Faelor was enormous; only the priests of intermediate gods or higher knew exactly how many true gods existed on this plane.

Countless gods had fallen in the countless aeons of Faelor's existence. Looking at the history of the plane, no mortals knew exactly how many gods had been born in history. It was exactly because the churches were so secretive that the Book of Gods that recorded the divine power of every god had been forbidden.

True gods could fall. They could seal their divine kingdoms and lay dormant. They could even descend upon the plane as a mortal with divine blood, awaiting their chance to reignite their godfire. There were many 'new' gods in Faelor's history that were just old gods revived.

The pantheon was so complicated that it was nearly impossible for a mortal priest to grasp all its intricacies. When two priests who were strangers to each other met, they would inspect the level and characteristics of the other's divine power. The servants of a god of deceit and a god of lies were unlikely to conflict, while the gods of order and chaos were natural opposites. However, as long as the gods they served did not clash, priests were reluctant to fight.



## Book 3, Chapter 82 - Darling of Destiny

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There would certainly be priests in the army for the Bloodstained Highway project, so Flowsand was prepared to disguise herself as the priest of an ancient god that had recently been revived. She was very good at analysing and using divine power; she knew her timeforce conflicted with the divine power of Runai, so she might conflict with her worshippers.

The most likely church to appear in the alliance would be the Church of Ceres. Although the Eternal Dragon held power over space as well, that was a formidable attribute that could only be displayed at a very high level. Kellac was a veteran while Io was proficient at using his divine power; they wouldn't expose any flaws that would alert the worshippers of Ceres.

With many of the clerics like Kars and Marvin having documented pasts, while Caesar wasn't even fallen, there was sufficient leeway for Flowsand to claim that they were all servants of a revived god.

Zim continued to prove himself a big variable, demonstrating the extravagant spirit and wealth of a powerful family. He ultimately contributed a third of the army. Even all the vassals of the Direwolf Duke combined had only made for less than a quarter, mostly coming from young nobles who wanted to go on an adventure and make a fortune. Bevry had spent much of his time since stealing the dragon bones resisting the vengeance of the Whiterock Dukedom and was short on troops. Just that quarter was hard to put together.

Richard decided to talk to Zim properly once. This should have been done when the Viscount arrived at Bluewater by himself, but it had been held up due to various reasons.

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Zim arrived punctually at Richard's accommodations when night

fell. Richard was seated on the balcony, preparing refreshments. The blood-red moon was at its largest, bigger even to the eye than the sun. One could even see the ridges of mountains clearly. Legends said behind the moon were the divine kingdoms of all the gods.

Sitting before Richard, Zim seemed a little uptight and nervous. With most healing power spent on internal injuries, Richard's face was still full of bruises. However, only those without any knowledge of the situation would laugh at this shabby appearance; having witnessed the battle with Io personally, Zim felt fear from the bottom of his heart at the sight of these scars. The experience of being beaten twice had left great trauma behind as well, all that pain and fear now surging from the depths of his mind.

Richard poured a cup of tea and pushed it towards the Viscount, "There isn't anything great here. This is the best tea I can offer."

Zim was both overwhelmed and flattered, toasting Richard and gulping down the drink in one go. He then stuck out his tongue due to the heat, his fair face turning red.

"You only made a trip here for the Bloodstained Highway project?" Richard asked him.

Zim hesitated for a moment, but under Richard's stern gaze he started sweating and finally caved in, "This is the last batch of troops my father and Duke Grasberg are willing to give me; I will have to rely on my own income for any future armies. Your plan has the potential to earn a lot of gold if it succeeds, allowing me to expand my power. The plan might seem crazy, but with you at the helm, I believe the chances of failure are low."

"If that was the case, you should have come to me after I beat you the second time," Richard clearly expressed his doubts. He stared into the Viscount's eyes, not missing the slightest reaction. He was wondering whether Zim knew something or was just the shield for another's ploy once more.

The Viscount constantly wiped off the cold sweat emerging on his forehead, remembering events that he clearly wished to forget, “No! Your ability wasn’t convincing enough at that time, how could I bet on you? But then you killed Odom and all his elite knights... That makes you worthy of investing into.”

“And?”

“What else?” Zim began sweating once more, eventually giving up all resistance, “There are two other reasons. One is that my family has lost far too much at your hands. The benefits of a fight with you aren’t worth it in the eyes of the family council. If you annihilate our private army once more, our very roots will be shaken. Fortunately Duke Bevry was greatly injured in the war with the Whiterock Dukedom, or the situation would not be good. I didn’t expect you to send me an invitation as well. I know it was just a joke, but the chance was worth taking. I came because I know someone like you will not easily go back on his words.”

Richard felt a little helpless in the face of Zim’s thick skin. But from another perspective, this proved that the Highland Unicorn wasn’t completely useless.

“You said there is a second reason.”

“Father and the Duke wish to obtain some runes and high-end magic equipment. Of course, we’ll definitely pay well for them!”

“You should be very clear what runes and magic equipment are worth,” Richard said with a laugh, “Why would I arm an enemy? Just buy everything on the market.”

High-end magic equipment was just like runes; they needed to be used on a large scale to truly show their prowess. Richard thus always distributed everything he sold to a variety of influences. As long as they didn’t all gather together, they wouldn’t pose a threat to himself. At the same time, this was also a method to consume the wealth of Faelor’s nobles. By the time someone resolute managed to collect enough equipment from others, he would have

left them behind.

“We aren’t enemies any longer, no?” Zim asked with hope, “I brought out all of my men as well as every soldier I could borrow for the Bloodstained Highway project. Once we fight alongside each other, we can be considered comrades. What’s more, our dispute was insignificant to begin with.”

“Insignificant?” Richard broke into laughter. The deaths of several great mages and priests as well as an elite troop of a thousand men as well as a saint... this was insignificant? But looking at Zim’s genuine expression and sincere tone, Richard finally understood that the Highland Unicorn likely only considered the two battles he had personally participated in to be part of their dispute.

But Richard immediately detected something amiss. Zim wasn’t as foolish as he made it seem, and his expression indicated that there was something else afoot. If not for that, the Viscount wouldn’t look so apprehensive.

“Speak, what’s the other matter?” Richard asked calmly.

“What?!” Zim was shocked, “That... There’s still a small issue that can be considered personal, but... how do I phrase it... Father and the Duke also accepted this tacitly. Some time ago, there was another woman by my side. Countess Katrina, His Majesty’s niece. Her husband passed away very early on, and she’s only 26 years of age. She came to me for a child who could awaken the unicorn bloodline...”

Richard flashed a meaningful smile, “Isn’t that a good thing?”

Zim went pale, “I’ve been with her for four months, but I don’t see any possibilities of having children. Except for a few days, in these past four months... I’ve had sex almost two or three times a day! It’s driving me crazy! She’s a woman with lots of needs, and she’s driven everyone else away. I really can’t stand it anymore, so I escaped to the Bloodstained Lands. She has many lovers; as long

as I don't return, I don't think she'll last a month without looking for someone else."

Richard looked at the Viscount with eyes full of sympathy, "That really can't be easy. But... You want to use me as a shield?"

"You're not afraid of that woman or any of her lovers!" Zim shouted.

"That doesn't mean I'm fine with being used," Richard said casually as he sipped his tea.

"I've contributed the largest number of troops to your plan, and I'm taking care of logistics as well!"

"That's enough for this," Richard said with a nod, "But don't you think about getting any weapons and runes from me."

"NO! If I can't get them, the family will call me back and use me for that woman! How much do you want? I'll pay twice the market price!"

Zim was a pale, fat slob, but he actually didn't look too bad. In fact, he was only a short distance away from being handsome. For him to be left with psychological trauma by sex... Whoever the woman was, her tastes were not ordinary. Of course, there was still the possibility that the attraction of the unicorn bloodline was just too strong.

Richard suddenly remembered that one of the bloodline options during his sacrifice in Norland had been the holy unicorn. The list had made the creature seem comparable to majestic dragons and young astral beasts.

"Tell me, what's unique about your bloodline?"

## Book 3, Chapter 83 - Darling of Destiny(2)

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“We know of three abilities from my bloodline. One is Maturation; anyone who awakens this bloodline will enter a stage of hibernation that greatly increases their strength. Once done, they will at least be at level 16. The second is War Talent; the ability greatly increases one’s strength in actual battles, giving their attacks a chance to break through magic. The last one is Nature’s Domain; it enhances a mage’s mana recovery and their nature affinity.”

Richard looked Zim up and down, asking playfully, “Then your ability is Maturation?”

“Yes! But I still don’t know when I will go into hibernation.” The Viscount had a face full of pride.

Richard sighed, his palm latching onto his forehead. No wonder the unicorn bloodline could compare to a dragon; surely enough, these abilities went beyond belief, especially Maturation. No matter who it was, they only had to sleep a little to become a Faelor saint. No wonder Zim did nothing all day, he didn’t need to put in any effort at all. It was also reasonable for the Sequoia Kingdom to attach such importance to his bloodline; every awakening of this ability was a future saint powerhouse. Who wouldn’t value something so great?

Ever since he had left Rooseland, Richard hadn’t rested for a single moment. He didn’t even dare to sleep, working tirelessly to reach level 12, but Zim just had to rest for some time and his level would far exceed his own. He finally lost his inner balance.

This was a fucking child of destiny! Richard glared at Zim’s plump face, unable to help but say sourly, “As you are, even if you hibernated and woke up as a saint you would be the weakest saint in existence.”

“No problem!” Zim chuckled with no sense of shame, “At worst,

I'll just fight people around level 11 or 12 when the time comes."

Richard felt a huge headache coming on and interrupted Zim's words, "Alright, I understand. Now, let's talk about remuneration."

"Remuneration?"

"Remuneration for being your shield."

Zim wailed, "Didn't we already discuss that?"

"I just changed my mind. I think it's better to hand you over to Countess Katrina now."

"No!" Zim shrieked miserably.

In the end, Richard still reached an agreement with the Viscount. The additional blackmail netted him large amounts of quality equipment for cheap, also giving him sufficient amounts of rare minerals. Richard found out during their discussion that Zim's family controlled three ores that could be sold for a high price in Norland, an unexpected bonus.

Zim didn't understand why Richard had suddenly raised the price even after he left. However, he had finally obtained the two most important things he needed; a supply of magic equipment and runes, as well as escape from life as the Countess' mate.

Richard suddenly felt a lot happier and more comfortable after sending Zim off. He now had a firm foothold in Faelor, able to gain constant profits from planar war. In absolute terms, his earnings were even higher than the Resting Orchid plane that Gaton had operated for a long time. Of course, that was essentially due to his identity as runemaster and the support of the Church of the Eternal Dragon.

In addition, the nobility of the Resting Orchid plane could not compare to that of Faelor.

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The nobles participating in the Bloodstained Highway Project slowly sent over their armies over the next few days. The process was extremely long, even the vanguard needing half a month to arrive. The entire army only gathered once a month had passed.

With a rare month of free time on his hand, Richard was determined to devoting all his time to the production of runes. Any spare time he had beyond that was used to meditate, growing his mana pool.

The lack of personal strength had now started to weigh down on his heart. He had learnt during the sacrifice that the elven bloodline had a Celestial Rain ability that could double the effects of his meditation technique. This was the only method he knew to quickly grow his power.

The astral rays caught by Deepblue Fantasy could strengthen his bloodline, but then it would be used up and not affect his mana pool. This was a dilemma, but during meditation that night Richard directed the two astral rays he captured in the first hour towards his bloodline tree. However, he had limited control over these rays; only one was assimilated, the other ending up strengthening his mana pool instead.

This was the first time his elven bloodline had actually been strengthened by an astral ray. The tree seemed to glow for a few moments after absorbing the energy, but then there didn't seem to be any further change. Fortunately, Precision allowed him to detect the subtle change in his bloodline strength. The second hour had not been so lucky, only ending with a single astral ray that he hadn't managed to integrate into his bloodline at all.

He had captured a total of 26 astral rays over that night, successfully integrating ten into the tree. The originally barren trunk of his astral affinity finally showed a touch of green, the colour of life.

The tiny change greatly increased his confidence. Over the



following month, he sent as many of the astral rays as he could to the astral trunk.

The night before the Bloodstained Highway army was gathered completely, Richard integrated his 300th astral ray into his astral trunk. What was once a dead tree suddenly shook, a leaf slowly appearing on the top branch. His astral affinity had finally been unlocked!

Richard almost jumped up in joy. The ability to successfully activate one of his affinities clearly showed the strength of the Deepblue Fantasy.

It wasn't far from dawn. Richard restrained his excitement and continued to meditate. However, the new leaf atop his astral stem suddenly started to tremble lightly the moment he slipped away, eight astral rays appearing around him at the same time! One of them was even exceptionally large, double the size of a normal ray.

The huge surprise nearly broke Richard out of meditation immediately. The mere unlocking of his affinity had increased his efficiency by a third; the bottleneck now wasn't in being able to find astral rays, but in being able to capture so many. Thankfully a particularly large one came along every once in a while, making the choices easy.

However, one more hour of meditation and it grew too difficult for him to maintain his calm. He withdrew; the day's gains were huge, and it was also necessary to indulge properly from time to time.

He looked out the window, judging that there was about half an hour left to dawn. He put on a coat and left his residence, leisurely patrolling the camp in the dark of the night.

Most of the armies had already arrived, setting up camp outside Bluewater one after the other. Outside the oasis now were a dozen or so camps of varying sizes, with Viscount Zim's the closest to Richard's lands. The Viscount's camp was blanketed in silence in

the distance, the only visible silhouettes being the uniformed patrol soldiers under the light of their torches.

In contrast, the discipline in the other army camps was much worse. The vassals of the Direwolf Duke were the best of the lot, but there were still scattered warriors walking around from time to time. Some of the camps were actually empty; the soldiers had obviously headed into the city to have fun. Another camp was brightly lit in the middle of a party, the noise quite audible.

Seeing these troops, Richard could not help but shake his head. However, he had not planned to rely on these thugs in the first place. He was confident in being able to find some use even for these private armies without much strength.

A sudden glow pushed away the thick fog of darkness. Richard didn't have to look to realise that it was Io, the fellow who loved making himself look brilliant and eye-catching whenever he could. Right, it had almost been a month since he had last seen this fellow. He still saw Flowsand occasionally, but the battle priest's figure had somehow disappeared from her side.

Richard had grown more open-minded after beating the man up. However, if the priest was still petty he wouldn't mind beating him up again. He had realised now that he had a long way to go to achieve Gaton's incomparable tolerance. Of course, when Gaton's temper flared the man wouldn't let off a single grain of sand.

The light grew brighter and brighter until Io was right next to Richard, watching the interesting scenes of the various camps together. "Shouldn't you be meditating at this time, level 12 mage?"

Richard did not grace the question with an answer, instead saying, "If you're so shiny in battle, you'll become a target for the enemy archers."

"Is that so? Did you not know that battle priests of the Eternal Dragon do not fear archers?" Io smiled.

“Not being afraid of archers doesn’t mean you’re not afraid of death. You forget I beat you unconscious,” Richard said in a leisurely manner. Right now, his confidence was overflowing.

“It won’t be long before I’m level 14,” the battle priest tried a different angle of attack.

“I’ll still be level 12 for some time,” Richard responded. The words were spoken indifferently, with a strong sense of confidence that made the battle priest frown. In their last match, he hadn’t expected Richard to be so sturdy and resilient; the victory was merely one of luck. However, once he rose to level 14 he did not believe Richard could rely on simple technique to make up for the difference. Regardless, the melee abilities of heavenly guardians rose with their level.

“You only dare to fight those who are lower level than you?” Richard continued, “When Flowsand and I first came to Faelor, every battle was with enemies whose levels far surpassed ours.”

Io was not moved by Richard’s words. “Level is the one true advantage. That said, Sir great mage, I heard you have an incredibly powerful teacher who could perform the highest grade of ceremony twice in less than a year. That’s hard to imagine!”

Richard laughed, “I do have a great teacher, and I have a great family as well. My parents gave me a powerful bloodline. However, if both of us started at the same point, you would definitely be beneath my feet right now! While I work hard on meditation and spend my time studying runes to the point that I don’t even waste time sleeping, what do you do? Don’t talk as if I have any advantage over you, if you have the guts then come take me down!”

Io smiled as well, “Don’t think you’re the only one giving his best. Let’s wait and see, in any case we still have time.”

“Keep lying to yourself.”

The battle priest finally grew furious, pointing to the camps in the distance and saying with a cold smile, “You’re going to rely on this mob to cut through the Bloodstained Lands?”

“Is that not possible?” Richard shot back.

“Even a sheep can become a lion in my hands! If you want to cut through the Bloodstained Lands, you need me!” Io said loftily.

However, Richard laughed once more, “I can turn a herd of sheep into a wolf pack! Was I not fighting wars before you even showed up?”

Io could not muster an immediate response. “Well then, Mr. level 12 mage, let me see what kind of miracles you can bring about!”

Richard’s heroic spirit suddenly burst forth, nature calling to him. Since there was nobody around, he simply unzipped his pants and started relieving himself into the bushes, “You’ll see. If you’re not going to listen to my commands, then just stay here. I don’t need someone who can’t follow orders around, even if they’re a battle priest. Let me be blunt, your existence really won’t affect these battles.”

Io snorted loudly, also unzipping his pants as he snapped back, “You think those with real power are as shameless as you? Only the so-called nobles like you cheat this way!”

Thus, just before the sun dawned on the camp, a great mage and a battle priest faced off in a different kind of duel. The battle ended in a draw.

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The next morning, Richard inspected his new army for the first time.

All the sub-armies were taken to a field in turns, with Richard inspecting them in the delegates’ presence. This allowed him to compare the quality of the private armies at a single glance. The Direwolf Duke’s vassals were all war fanatics, there was no need to

dwell on how elite their troops were, but most surprisingly it was Zim's soldiers that were the best!

Richard already knew the reason for this, however. Zim's troops were actually made of soldiers from Earl Yatu and Duke Grasberg, while his mother had also transferred over some elite warriors from the royal family. To allow the Viscount to rise once more, his family had still invested a lot of their hard-earned savings.

Richard's troops only came up at the end. He only sent in the humanoid warriors, but they managed to subdue all the other nobles in one fell swoop.

## Book 3, Chapter 84 - Wisdom

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A total of 700 level 9 warriors! Coupled with warhorses, Richard's men could easily form an elite force on the same level as the Golden Eagles, in fact exceeding them in pure numbers alone!

Looking at the equipment of these warriors, they could undoubtedly take out multiple times their own number. But that wasn't all; Richard also had an elite group of mages and clergymen.

Seeing this overbearing army, all of the nobles fell silent. The representatives here were different from the ones a month ago; many had been swapped out for high-levelled officers with sufficient experience. They naturally saw how unique of a force this troop was. No general would wish to face such an enemy.

Richard was quite satisfied at this reaction. Flaunting one's army was an effective means of intimidation, something he needed to do as a foundation for the rest of the project.

Regardless of the size, these noble families always placed great importance on autonomy in battle. They had a mix of good and bad soldiers, so strict discipline would need to be instilled into their men. Richard had to train them all in basic troop formations and command structures; if not done properly, regardless of how gifted he was he would not be able to control them.

He estimated that he had to spend at least ten days of time solely on organisation. There was already a clear idea of what he wanted in his mind; outside of splitting them all up into different branches, he would also break them down into three different levels.

The core would be made of his own troops, becoming the main force that would ensure his victory. Second only to them would be the troops provided by Viscount Zim and the Direwolf Duke; these soldiers were just like those in the Forest Plane, they had great potential once they were organised and trained. As for the others,

they would fill in any gaps or work as cannon fodder. Of course, Richard was such a great leader that it was unlikely for them to be sacrificed.

Once he was done inspecting the troops, Richard gathered all the captains from the various noble families, immediately getting into the organisational plan. As expected, there was an immediate outcry. All the captains stated that he was trying to engage in a conspiracy.

However, Viscount Zim and Bevry's vassals immediately pledged their commitment to Richard's instructions. With their vote of confidence, a lot of the protests from the rest died down. In the end, only one captain who had contributed 200 soldiers requested to withdraw.

Richard, who had been silent all the while, started stroking his rough moustache, "We're already at this stage, but you still want to withdraw?"

The captain immediately jumped out from his chair, drawing his longsword and roaring, "What are you going to do about it? I'm a knight of the Sequoia Kingdom—"

Thud! Richard hadn't allowed him to finish, appearing in front of him in a flash and landing a punch right on his face!

The blow was quick as lightning; never in his wildest dreams had the man imagined that Richard would actually hit him. Drawing the sword was merely a show of might, he had no intentions of making a scene in front of the general; if anything, he had paid attention to Richard's followers and personal guards. Who would expect a mage to actually hit someone with their fists?

The level 12 warrior fell down with a single blow, struggling for a while before fainting completely. Richard had evidently put a lot of force into that punch, knocking the man out cold.

The nobles went into a commotion once more. They hadn't been

present to witness the scene of Richard and Io in physical combat. Mages and priests in Faelor were known for their weak physiques. It was only Zim who remained unsurprised; if not for being conscious of his family's reputation, he would have jumped up and trampled on the fellow to show his undying loyalty.

The Highland Unicorn's attitude towards Richard had changed greatly in recent times. He had gone from wrath to fear to panic, finally settling down on loyalty. There was even a little dependance mixed in.

Leaning against a wall, Io suddenly arched his brows. He was the only one present who could tell that Richard had used a combat technique from the church. He had never expected the mage to improve so much in such a short span of time. If this went on, it would spell trouble.

Richard returned to his seat and sat down calmly, saying to Gangdor, "I'm giving you control of his soldiers." Gangdor immediately answered in the affirmative, not asking what to do if he faced resistance.

Richard looked around the place, causing everyone to fall silent. He then stood up and placed both palms on the table, body leant forward as he said solemnly, "I know many of you are unhappy with the reorganisation of the army. However, it is necessary if we wish to fight through the Bloodstained Lands with such a small number of soldiers. We cannot increase the scale of the operation; any more men and we'll run out of supplies. Ten days into the project, I will give you all a chance to withdraw. If anyone wishes to leave at that time, you can take your men back home.

"Remember, ten days. It will be your last chance." Many felt the tone of this last sentence was peculiar.

Once the meeting came to an end, the nobles all left the room with various comments. They had realised these ten days were meant to reassure them of Richard's abilities, to give them hope. It



was only then that they were reminded of this frontier knight's many victories, debates starting everywhere.

However, Zim's face turned ashen after a while; the bulk of the discussion on Richard's stellar victories was built upon the losses of himself and his family. He eventually had enough, coughing heavily to remind these fellows of their error in judgement. They immediately shifted the topic, someone wondering out loud how far Richard could get within ten days. Some said thirty kilometres, while others said fifty. Both these distances held strategic locations they needed to attack.

The scatterbrained Zim had already forgotten the slight, engaging in the discussion and insisting that Richard would hit eighty kilometres. Those here were well aware of the Viscount's vengeful personality; although they didn't dare to refute him directly, their expressions made it obvious that he was just overstating Richard's competence as a cover for his own failures. After all, he had suffered heavy losses at Richard's hands. A bulk of those present did not know the Viscount hadn't been involved in the latter part of the dispute.

Of course, many of those present had completely forgotten that their private armies were nowhere near comparable to the Viscount's elites.

...

Richard had his own plans, but he did not share them with the rest. He was busy with organising his troops in the day, and had increased the time he spent at night meditating. Ever since he managed to increase his mana growth through the astral affinity, he had pushed as many astral rays as he could towards the tree in his sea of consciousness. The earlier he grew this particular ability, the better the results would be. The trunk's evolution was growing more and more evident with time; a second branch had sprouted already, tip green in preparation for another leaf to spout. The only question was what powers this second leaf would have.

He had already shelved the matter with Io. The dispute seemed insignificant in the grand scheme of things, and he had more pressing matters to attend to. Fighting with the rank and file of the army was foolish at best, and in the worst case it was a recipe for disaster.

Outside of meditating, he also crafted runes for Zendrall and Flowsand. He gave the necromancer a grade 2 rune that could increase his mana pool by 30%, thus increasing the count of his undead army by the same value. It was the one for Flowsand that had taken a lot of his energy and time; Richard had even made two rare errors before he could finally complete it.

Flowsand's rune had the ability to increase her casting speed. Although it was a grade 2 rune, it was more difficult than some normal grade 3 ones to craft. However, this speed-up of 10% was of utmost importance to her.

In the end, he had also crafted a rune that could permanently increase one's strength by 20% for practice. He passed it to Zim as a reward, allowing the Viscount to report back to his clan. Zim was surprised and thrilled at the prospect, immediately having a trusted aide send it home.

Richard had completed the reorganisation by the time ten days had passed. The army's discipline had grown as well, but that was on the back of the deaths of ten unruly soldiers. On the eleventh day, an army that was almost 10,000 strong left Bluewater Oasis to officially start the Bloodstained Highway!

When they stepped out of the city, even Richard could not foresee the major events that would unfold over the course of this great war.

Following the army were 10,000 slaves who were meant to help with logistics. There were also roughly ten caravans headed by the Golden Warflag, allowing them to obtain supplies whenever they stopped at a stronghold.

Richard didn't head out on horseback, instead taking a carriage alongside Flowsand. The cleric had her chin rested on both her hands, gazing longingly at him as he studied a map.

"No, this won't work!" he muttered to himself after a while, "I need to pair the clerics with mages; that will produce the best results."

As he got to that point, he frowned and rubbed his temples, "On the other hand, the mages are alright... but these clergymen definitely won't listen to my commands. What should I do... Do I really have to give them any leeway?"

Flowsand suddenly saw a pained expression flash across Richard's face for the third time that day. The Deepblue's mages were strong as oxen, why did he seem so tired and worn out? She couldn't hold it in any longer, asking, "Richard, are you alright? Please rest if you're tired. I can't use my spells freely right now, so i can't help you."

"I don't know what's wrong, my head's been hurting badly over the past few days..." A mind-numbing pain assaulted Richard even as he spoke. It was so intense that he helplessly grabbed his head!

## Book 3, Chapter 85 - Wisdom(2)

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“What’s wrong with you?” Flowsand panicked once more. However, every detection spell she cast had no reaction; there was no need for healing or purification. Richard had always possessed a strong will; for him to show such pain on his face meant it was excruciating.

Richard’s senses had been dulled by the torturous pain; he couldn’t hear a word of what Flowsand was saying. This was an indescribable agony, a feeling of his very soul being torn apart. There were no physical painkillers that could help. At the peak of his suffering, he even rammed his head against the walls of the carriage. However, even that pain was negligible in comparison, not helping him resist the torment at all.

Flowsand was completely flustered at this point. She cast every spell she knew on Richard, even calling Kellac and Io in for assistance. All of Richard’s followers flocked around the carriage as well, watching as Richard writhed on the floor. Everyone was at a loss, but to keep up the army’s morale they had to pretend that there was no issue.

Zim’s army was the closest to Richard, and he was also the first to notice the situation. He sensed something when Richard’s followers blocked him, tacitly retreating. He even sent away a few of the others who also noticed the commotion.

Flowsand’s spells were completely useless, so Kellac and Io didn’t manage anything either. It was actually Zendrall that came through in that moment. A greyish-white mist arose in his eyes as he cast All-Seeing Eye upon himself, focusing this vision that was meant to inspect the dead on Richard. “He is going through some sort of transformation!” he said suddenly.

Although the necromancer did not know exactly what kind of transformation this was, his words still allowed everyone to sigh

lightly in relief. All they could do now was wait.

A few minutes later, the twitching of Richard's body slowly faded away. Within his sea of consciousness, he was gazing at the bundle of hazy light that was his own soul. Various energies surged around the sphere as one part squirmed out, a tiny speck of milky-white light bursting out from the main body. This speck was a candle to his main soul's bonfire, but the moment it appeared Richard suddenly felt like he had another pair of eyes. It was as though a new window had opened in his mind.

A second voice appeared in his mind, a secondary awareness capable of individual thought and judgement. This new consciousness could not compare to his primary mind when it came to processing capability, but it was still twice as fast as a commoner. This was already at the level where one would be called clever.

He finally understood what had happened. With just how much he exercised his blessing of wisdom in recent times, the ability had advanced once more to grade 3. This grade did not increase the processing speed of his mind directly, instead cleaving out a new consciousness that could handle issues individually. However, the process of splitting his consciousness apart was excruciating, as though his soul was being torn apart.

Only when the new consciousness stabilised did Richard awake, struggling to get up. Seeing him recover, everyone sighed in relief. However, he still felt extremely fatigued, falling into a deep sleep after hastily reassuring them that he was alright.

It was already dusk by the time he woke up again, and he found himself lying in a tent. Both minds awoke together, the world a sudden double image. Richard found it very difficult to adapt.

Another issue was in finding something for the new mind to do. He was in no hurry to get out of bed, instead just laying there as he sorted out all the work that he needed to accomplish in the near

future in order of importance. He graphed this list with respect to urgency, finally picking out the tasks that were high in both criteria for the new mind to take care of.

Going back and forth on it repeatedly, he eventually chose to have the mind continue his ongoing research into the clerical fighting techniques.

The martial arts of the Church of the Eternal Dragon were extremely profound; there were only a dozen or so basic stances, but they could be combined in thousands of ways. Taking into account the environment they could be used in, the options were endless. The same techniques would exhibit vastly disparate power in the hands of two different people. Richard was aware that even his blessing of wisdom and Flowsand's teachings left his abilities far from those of Io. The only reason he had won that day was a combination of luck and a willingness to risk his life.

Of course, improving his martial arts wasn't just to compete with Io. Richard needed a pure growth in personal power right now, and although these techniques weren't as effective as a direct increase in level, they were still the best method outside of that and runes.

Besides, there was something universal about martial arts at their peak. The more he trained in the martial arts of the Church, the more he found that the increased flexibility and agility was boosting his usage of the secret swords of Silvermoon.

The secret swords were a martial inheritance that was poles apart from regular fighting techniques. Ever since he had learnt them from Gaton that day, Richard had been analysing them to the best of his ability. However, a growth in the power of the swords did not come from regular practice, nor were there strict requirements in terms of the stances. The techniques were based almost solely on the strength of one's moonforce and the power of their body.

Richard had thus arrived at a conclusion that was not a

conclusion. The secret swords were likely battle techniques that grew more powerful with the general might of their user. However, he had no opportunity to learn top-grade martial techniques to prove this conjecture. Most traditional martial arts were not suited for spellcasters.

Simulating the clerical martial arts was an extremely burdensome task. Some preliminary estimates told him that even if his second mind operated day and night without rest, it would take several centuries for him to master every aspect. He did not have centuries of life to spare, but he still followed through on his decision. Every small improvement in these skills was a corresponding improvement in his own individual strength. Be it in the Bloodstained Lands, Norland, or anywhere else, exceeding personal might would always be able to save one's life in times of need.

Once he was done getting used to the new consciousness, Richard noticed that he was slightly hungry and headed out of the tent. He gathered all of his followers and Viscount Zim, learning of the current situation over dinner.

The army had advanced another ten kilometres after he had fallen asleep before setting up camp and waiting for him to wake up. With him missing, Zim had actually done his utmost to ensure that the situation remained stable.

The army was currently about ten kilometres from the first thorn in their path; Camp Bluesquare.

Camp Bluesquare was an enormous slave camp northwest of Bluewater Oasis. It was an important hub for slave trade in the Bloodstained Lands. With tens of thousands of slaves imprisoned within, it was comparable to a small city. At full capacity, the place could even accommodate 100,000 slaves! With the constant threat of bandits and revolts, the thousand or so guards here were all merciless elites.

Camp Bluesquare was under the ownership of Earl Lambert of the Iron Triangle Empire. This was a legendary figure, once a small titled knight of the Empire that was extremely devious. After a slave deal in the depths of the Bloodstained Lands, he had devoted himself to this profession. Several decades later, he had gathered a huge number of slaves that gave him immense wealth as well as quite a bit of land. His army was similarly large, with multiple slaving teams active in the Bloodstained Lands. This had made the Earl notorious even in the Iron Triangle Empire; most nobles were unwilling to provoke someone who had established themselves through slave trade.

With Earl Lambert's background as well as the geographical location of Camp Bluesquare, the place was one of the most important resupply points en route to the Iron Triangle Empire. There were a large number of armed merchant groups travelling through the place throughout the year, with Red Cossack having at least a thousand men stationed here at all times.

Red Cossack had stopped gathering their main forces once they learnt of Richard's reappearance, quietly disappearing from Bluewater when they learnt of his crushing defeat of Sir Odom's army. However, they hadn't stopped accumulating troops at Camp Bluesquare. There were 1,500 guards at the camp right now, about the same number as came from Earl Lambert.

The camp had a total of nearly 4,000 men at various levels of training and equipment. They would find it difficult to repel Richard's enormous army that was over 10,000 strong, but they were still confident in holding on for a few battles. One could not forget the slaves in the camp. If all of them were mobilised, it wouldn't be an issue to hold on for ten days to half a month.

The Bloodstained Highway Project was by no means a secret. The preparations had taken nearly two months, and news had naturally spread throughout the land by that time; the only unknown was the exact route this army would take. The merchant



groups that were still in Camp Bluesquare had already received news of Richard's army heading their way. Outside of Red Cossack and a few other small organisations that were on good terms with the Earl, everyone had fled at night to escape the fires of war.

Whenever these kinds of battles popped up, any unrelated guards or slaves in the camp would be transferred elsewhere immediately. Everything was measured in gold to these merchants, and with Earl Lambert's personality he would not compensate them for any losses they sustained in the war. Even if there was some compensation, it would not cross a single gold coin per person; the same amount that one would use to shoo a beggar away. Why would anyone work hard for someone like that?

## Book 3, Chapter 86 - Undercurrent

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Having understood their location, Richard looked at the time. It was seven in the evening. “Alright, gather all the captains at eleven. I want to discuss our plans for attacking Camp Bluesquare.”

“Eleven?” Viscount Zim thought this timing very interesting. Wasn’t that the time for them to rest and sleep? If they did not rest, how would they have the energy to fight the next day?

However, Richard nodded, “Eleven! Also Zim, come over at eight-thirty.”

He then finished off an entire five kilograms of roasted boar ribs before returning to his tent, starting to ponder over the map. His followers disappeared one after the other. The camp quickly quieted down; outside of the patrolling soldiers, everyone slowly entered a world of dreams. With a battle imminent, even the most rebellious ruffian would rest earnestly; who did not treasure their minuscule lives?

Richard analysed the map for a while before taking a look at the time and reclining on his bed. A bird’s eye view of Camp Bluesquare immediately appeared in his consciousness.

It was late in the night, but the camp was still brightly lit. Fully-armed soldiers guided groups of slaves to carry huge amounts of stones and sandbags up the walls to fortify the defences. Ballistae were being brought out of the warehouse.

The ballistae were an entire three metres long; atop a city defence tower, they could shoot as far as a thousand metres with immense power. Camp Bluesquare had four such ballistae, one on each corner of the walls. Only two were functional currently; the other two would only complete assembly by midnight.

The ballistae were a huge investment on Earl Lambert’s part, and

had just been transported to Camp Bluesquare. Each ballista had two bolts with tracking enchantments, the bolts alone worth 100,000 gold each. If not for how important the camp was, Lambert would rather rely on normal tactics like slave soldiers and human millstones to withstand the siege. In the Bloodstained Lands, such ballistae were more valuable than human lives.

Nobody in Camp Bluesquare had noticed that there was an abnormally large number of bats scavenging for food that night. There were even a few especially large, strange bats mixed in. The images were transmitted to Richard's mind through the soul link, giving him every detail of the camp's defences.

Next to a ballista that had just been installed, a dozen or so fierce-looking half-naked slavers were guiding two mature trolls that were nearly four metres tall with their whips. The trolls dragged the heavy cuffs on their limbs, occasionally glaring at the surroundings and roaring as they revealed long fangs, but the only result of such defiance was a firm beating.

Behind the slavers, a few martial artists with an imposing aura stared at the trolls. Each was level 13; if their armour-cutting axes were whirled around, even these trolls wouldn't be able to endure the blows without broken bones.

In the end, the two trolls were still chased to the entrance of the city and were forced to a huge capstan. After which, with the pushing of the two trolls and twenty barbarian slaves, it slowly began to move. A city defence giant crossbow that had already been assembled finally began to creak and pull the bowstring that had been tanned and processed from a dozen or so rhinoceros hides.

Seeing that the trolls were pulling at the ballistae and not a portcullis or the like, Richard sighed in relief. However, he immediately recalled the terrifying cost of a portcullis; who would use such a structure in the Bloodstained Lands? Something like that would only exist in imperial capitals or other large cities, or in

forts that could not afford to be lost.

The bowstring was pulled taut, and following the order to release a furious howl rang out. The entire ballista bounced off the ground a little as a giant bolt disappeared into the night sky.

One of the bats in the sky immediately flew in the direction the arrow had disappeared, finding its final position in a moment. The test bolt had actually covered a total of 1,200 metres! This range left Richard feeling slightly alarmed.

With few exceptions, not even a grand mage could cast spells at this distance. If matched with enough tracking arrows, these ballistae were a hard counter to spellcasters. If one could pay for it, they would even get bolts enchanted with increased flight time; that would increase the range to a whopping 2,000 metres!

Thankfully these ballistae were very expensive. Most of the materials were spent on increasing the power and range, with little thought given to durability. As long as their main body was struck, these things would quickly turn into a pile of parts. From this point of view, they were far less troublesome than magic towers. If not for that, Richard really would have considered detouring around Camp Bluesquare. However, leaving an enemy camp with such a huge military force behind was something no commander with even the slightest of intellects would do.

Within the camp, a few gnomes quickly darted to the side of the giant crossbows and started calculating something. One of them with a white beard suddenly jumped on top of the thing and started shouting loudly, commanding the soldiers to transport metal ingots to strengthen the base of the ballista.

“Gnomes?” Richard was startled once more. This was an intelligent race that had spread through many planes. They weren’t tall and naturally flawed in terms of strength, but they made up for it with outstanding wisdom and agility. Some said they were closely related to dwarves, while others said they were

like humans, both races native to countless planes.

Gnomes were natural alchemists with exceptional magic talent. Their innate agility also made them great candidates for assassins as well. Richard had learnt that there were gnomes on Faelor, but it was said that their empire was even further west of the Ashen Plateau; between them were the near-unsurpassable Dragon Mountains.

This was his first time actually seeing members of the race in Faelor. It seemed like these ballistae had come from the hands of these gnomes; no wonder their power was unordinary. These ballistae were even approaching Norland's standard! Richard still remembered that most of the exquisite alchemical facilities in his own laboratory back in the Deepblue had come from gnomes; the rest were custom-made items from the elven empire.

'I need to keep these midgets alive!' Richard decided immediately. He wanted them in his possession.

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It drew late into the night, and the last two ballistae were eventually done with their test shots. Camp Bluesquare eventually entered a state of rest; their scouts had already determined the location of Richard's camp, and from the distance between them war would only start the next day at noon. Or there would be no war at all. After all, Earl Lambert and Richard hadn't conflicted directly before.

Lambert himself was 500 kilometres away, taking a copper tube from the claws of a carrier eagle. Having retrieved the information and studied it a few times, he quickly moved to his study and looked over the map of the Bloodstained Lands on the wall. He stroked his beard, deep in thought. Camp Bluesquare had been marked out clearly on the map; two of his four major slave transportation routes passed through there.

Within the study stood an aged great mage, one of the Earl's

trusted aides. The mage read through the information back and forth a few times before speaking, “Richard really did only bring 10,000. We have 4,000 soldiers capable of defending Camp Bluesquare. While that number is not ideal, Richard will need to pay a huge price if he wishes to attack the camp. I’m sure he will consider this carefully; after all, too many casualties and he won’t be able to advance westwards even if he gets the camp.

“However, it seems best to throw the Red Cossack men out as soon as possible. They are his mortal foes, I’m sure he will just ignore the camp and move on if the defences are solid and there are no Red Cossacks within.”

“Red Cossack doesn’t make a difference,” Earl Lambert hummed, “Richard isn’t someone who only pays attention to his enemies. However, if he wishes to attack Camp Bluesquare, let him try! My army is different from that trash!”

Hearing the murderous words of the Earl, the great mage involuntarily shivered. Lambert had personally taken at least several thousand lives, chopping off the heads of a slave or two whenever his mood was good or bad. In his own words, the moment a human head touched the ground was the most splendid moment in life.

The Earl was obviously in a very bad mood now; Richard had really brought an army to Camp Bluesquare’s doorsteps, and clearly he had no good intentions.

“My Lord, His Highness Salwyn is still awaiting your word,” the mage asked carefully.

Lambert’s expression grew all the more terrible and he hummed again and again, “I’m not going! Does the fellow think I don’t know what he’s planning? The Bloodstained Lands are really a gold mine, but not everyone can strike it rich here. How many years have I spent, how many lives to get to my current position? He’s a prince without a title and he wants a piece of the pie? What

right does he have? Tell him to find a way himself. He can forget about using me!”

The great mage nodded, “Alright. I know how I’ll answer.”

The mage then retreated from the study. Lambert did not care about how late it had gotten, still standing in front of the map staring hard at the mark on Camp Bluesquare. Actually, deep in his mind the Earl was not anxious. He had already made preparations, and on top of it all that person was still in the camp. If Richard came, he would only leave badly injured.

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At that very moment, the lights were still on in the castle of the Marquess of Strength Yang of the Iron Triangle Empire. The table at the centre had been replaced with a holographic map that was extremely precise, currently displaying the terrain of the southern part of the Iron Triangle Empire and the Bloodstained Lands.

Salwyn was stood in front of the map, using a long, retractable mithril pointer to accentuate his explanation, “I expect Richard’s army to break through the first 100 kilometres very quickly. This will establish faith in the nobles of the Sequoia Kingdom, prompting more to enter the alliance. Our army will be split into three. The light infantry will be under the command of Sir Aer, setting up defences at Bloodflag Valley. You’ll need to withstand Richard’s attacks for at least three days!”

## Book 3, Chapter 87 - Laying The Trap

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Salwyn pointed to another spot on the map, “General Hinton, you are to follow this route southward through Bluewater to bar Flintstone Forest. Find ways to delay any reinforcements from the Sequoia Kingdom for as long as possible.”

As Salwyn’s pointer moved along the magical map table, the pieces representing the army shifted accordingly and left behind tracks of their movements. He eventually fixed his eyes upon one last position, a freezing chill in his gaze as he shoved the pointer at a field in front of Bloodflag Valley, “When Richard arrives at Bloodflag Valley, I will personally lead the seventh and eighth divisions of the imperial soldiers as well as three knight regiments in a charge through the Skeletal Plains to battle it out with Richard. The march will take two entire days; Sir Aer, your job is paramount. As long as you can hold Richard off for three days, my army will be able to swallow him whole!”

Sir Aer was a strong, muscular middle-aged man of few words. “I will not disappoint you,” he said in a low voice before falling silent.

However, Salwyn was well-acquainted with this knight’s character. He punched hard at the man’s rock-hard chest, “Alright! Let’s give him a taste of the imperial army!”

Based purely on how the various pillars of the army interacted, it seemed absurd to wish to stop Richard’s mix of elite infantry and cavalry with an army made of pure light infantry. However, the ten or so nobles present and the numerous military officers did not doubt that this could be done.

Sir Aer was one of the Iron Triangle Empire’s most famous generals, extremely skilled at defence. Had it not been for the fact that his mother was once a lowly slave, he would long since have become a viscount. Still, despite his family background, it was publicly acknowledged that he would become a baron one day.



Salwyn stared hard at the Skeletal Plains, suddenly smiling as he muttered to himself, “An army of thirty thousand against your ten. Richard... I’d like to see how you’re actually going to fight this battle!”

Most of the people in the meeting room looked puzzled. Eventually, an Earl could not resist asking the question, “Your Highness, Richard is only an insignificant frontier knight. Is he worth so much effort? Why don’t you stick to your original plan and head north to annex those independent fiefs? That would certainly be a more striking contribution in the eyes of His Majesty.”

This earl had a point. Salwyn’s greatest chip in his contest for the throne was his capability as a commander. However, such a thing could not be demonstrated with mere talk; it needed tangible military successes. In recent years, Salwyn’s military endeavours hadn’t exactly been fruitful. He had led the allied armies in a battle against the invader Sinclair and was forced to retreat, but the same invader had perished at the hands of an insignificant baron of the Sequoia Kingdom. This was no different from a slap on his face!

All sorts of rumours had spread through the Empire after that loss. The other princes had grabbed the opportunity to accuse him of incompetence in front of the Emperor. Fortunately, Salwyn had his past successes to fall back on. In addition, Marquess Rislant had suffered a few defeats of his own in his battle against the Dragon Church. That was the only reason the Emperor had let Salwyn keep control of his troops.

For the past six months, Salwyn had been busy expanding his army and training his troops. He was also constantly trying to think of ways to rope in more nobles to his side. Many did not supply him with the manpower he desired, sending him a lump sum of money instead; he used this large amount of gold for new warriors, equipment, and training.

With a total of five divisions now under him, Salwyn’s army had

basically doubled in size. Its ability in combat was more or less boosted to the same extent. This force was originally headed north to annex a number of small countries and independent nobles all the way up to the Andes Promenade. This would give them control of Whale Bay, an important port.

Nobody had expected that Salwyn would change his plan the moment he heard of the Bloodstained Highway project, deciding to go all out to eliminate Richard at the Bloodstained Lands in one go!

But what good would this bring? Richard was basically an outsider without any reputation. He was merely a frontier knight, that title representing an upstart who was capable at war but had no other background. Even if Richard had seen some success in the Sequoia Kingdom, those of the Iron Triangle Empire didn't consider the Kingdom to be anything more than a bunch of powerful individual aristocrats.

The Bloodstained Lands were barren yet complicated. Bordering so many different races, this region was a natural place for war. It was hard to say how much the Empire could get out of the area, but the maintenance costs of such a war would be enormous. Annexing it wasn't even all that good a thing; it would bring their borders closer to many other countries.

Everyone thought this was an expensive battle that would not earn them anything even if they won.

Salwyn glanced through the faces of those present and saw mostly confusion and doubt. Indeed, this looked like a battle where the gains would not make up for the losses. However, an inconceivable pair of numbers popped into his mind once more.

2,800 to 310.

This was a ratio of casualties that left him puzzled and bitter. Even the crushing defeat against Sinclair hadn't left nearly as deep an impression on his mind as these numbers did. After all, he knew why he had lost to her; he was also confident that he would be able

to turn the tables in certain conditions. However, Richard was different. A disorderly mob of barbarians and desert warriors had achieved unimaginable results under this frontier knight's leadership. What would someone like that accomplish if he had control of a true army?

Salwyn had thus made a painful decision the moment he heard of Richard's plans. He turned his troops around, intending to eradicate the knight with an absolute military advantage!

"Each and every one of you, mark my words." His voice was deep and solemn, a certain gravity present now that had never shown itself before, "If we do not put an end to Richard now, he will certainly become a major enemy of the Empire in the future! Compared to the Empire's safety, my personal achievements are worth nothing."

Everyone present looked at each other in astonishment. None of them had seen the prince this serious before; they followed him not purely because of his title, nor for his skill at command. It wasn't only because he was a great mage. Salwyn's acute foresight had earned him admiration from many of the Empire's nobles.

Although they all knew that the Sequoia Kingdom's Bloodstained Highway Project was not a good thing for the Iron Triangle Empire, they were confident that they would be able to disturb the plan whenever appropriate. However, Salwyn had actually blown this matter up to a whole new level.

Only the formidable Marquess Yang was deep in thought. Red Cossack, an organisation he owned, had recently incurred disastrous losses in the Bloodstained Lands. An entire third of his core strength had dissipated, millions of coins lost. The Marquess could understand some of Richard's prowess.

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A storm was brewing in the north, ready to pounce on the Bloodstained Lands and tear Richard to shreds in one go. However,

the runemaster was completely unaware as he lay quietly on his bed, staring at the top of the tent.

In his mind was an extremely detailed map that covered the entirety of the Bloodstained Lands and the surrounding regions. He could see a surging army just setting off from Bluewater Oasis, advancing with irresistible force as they destroyed all the obstacles in their path to reach the Ashen Plateau. Various forces would rush towards this army one after the other, but every one was left greatly wounded by a current of steel!

Richard was simulating the entire war in his mind. The worst case scenario was four attacking armies charging out from the Iron Triangle Empire, each taking one of the four possible routes of intervention. Salwyn's name was labelled on each possible route these armies took; as the forces were crushed, his name was marked off with a red cross.

The corners of his lips lifted in an icy smile. "Salwyn," he said lightly to himself, "Don't you think of running back home if you dare to come over!"

The clock pointed towards ten in the night. Richard leapt off his bed and left the tent, sending a few mental commands. One of the side gates of the barracks was opened, all of his troops leaving the camp in formation and disappearing into the distance.

A moment later, the soldiers under Zim and the Direwolf Duke also left the camp in the dark of the night, their whereabouts unknown.

Only a few thousand footsoldiers were left in the camp by eleven, the exact time when the nobles and captains who had been turned into figureheads came to Richard's command tent. There was a sumptuous feast prepared here, and they were told that it was to be their supper. Richard's whereabouts were unknown, but Viscount Zim took his place as host.

It was impossible for Richard to completely hide the mobilisation

of his troops from everyone present. They knew he had taken some form of action, but no matter what it was they were just satisfied with not having to go to the battlefield.

Both nobles and generals loved food and drink. Everyone warmed up very quickly, a joyous atmosphere filled the tent.

The clock slowly made its way towards midnight.

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Camp Bluesquare had already settled into silence, filled with the heavy atmosphere that rose from an impending storm. One could hear almost nothing outside of the footsteps of the patrolling soldiers. The occasional neigh of a warhorse would echo into the distance.

A few light cavalymen were making their way back to the camp in the midst of the darkness. These were the scouts who patrolled around the army barracks; it was already time for a change of shifts.

Once they crossed a small hill, all of the soldiers could see the city's lights in the distance. The mere thought of hard liquor and cosy beds left many excited, and the horses were sped up.

Schlick! However, a sharp arrow shot out of the bushes nearby. The team captain fell from the horse as the arrow struck him, barely able to make any sound before the beast under his legs gave way as well. The long feathers of an arrow stifled the horse's neigh.

A rain of arrows then descended upon the patrol team, sending every single cavalryman to the ground. The attack had been far too sudden; only one person managed to let out a scream before they all collapsed, but even that was weak and brief. It certainly would not be heard from the barracks that was a little under two kilometres away.

An army marched out of the darkness, lined up in orderly rows as

they snuck into an area less than a kilometre away from Camp Bluesquare using the cover of the dark. All the soldiers sat down in formation, beginning to eat to replenish their strength.

Richard appeared at the rear of the troops, patiently waiting as he gazed upon Camp Bluesquare that was in the distance.

# Book 3, Chapter 88 - An Ambush In The Night

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The city walls were lit up so brightly it seemed like day. A group of fully-armed soldiers were guarding each of the ballistae.

The night wind suddenly grew stronger, blowing till the fire at the top of the city walls flickered on and off. The bats in the sky started flying lower and lower, some even entering the camp. A few points of light in Richard's consciousness were close to their intended positions.

"It's time." Richard sent the order calmly, spurring on his warhorse as he guided his followers to make a beeline towards Camp Bluesquare!

The sound of horses galloping was exceptionally loud in the quiet night. The sentinels atop the walls leaned forward and looked outside in bewilderment; the light cavalry was supposed to return to camp after their shift now, why were they running so hastily when there was no alarm? The soldiers on duty behind the wall chuckled and cursed, some vulgar words leading to hoots of laughter.

Groups of warriors stood up in order the moment Richard charged forth, jogging towards the camp. Outside of a few commands, nobody made any sounds in the entire process. The clerics and priests were on either side of the army, hastily blessing every squadron that passed them.

The sentinels atop the city walls were still scanning the surroundings. They finally saw a few fuzzy silhouettes on horseback at the boundaries of their sight; while there were less than ten, these people were not the light cavalry.

The sentinels were startled, even dazed. A veteran who had lived through many sieges could not believe that only these few were

planning to attack, immediately realising that there had to be more enemies in the shadows. He charged to the tower bell without telling any of his comrades, pulling at the rope with all his might. The powerful chime of the bell resounded throughout the camp!

The broodmother's drones were already nearby, quickly closing in on the camp's walls. At six metres tall, these structures may pose an obstruction to regular warriors but they were no different from flat land to powerhouses.

Richard spurred his horse on, covering the last stretch in the blink of an eye. He quickly entered the range of the archers, but less than half of those atop the wall could even manage to find their bows, draw, and shoot in time. Only a dozen or so arrows flew out in the first volley, barely adequate whether in terms of power or accuracy. Not one hit Richard's party or their horses, not even disturbing their charge.

A faint figure suddenly appeared next to Richard, moving much faster than his horse. It had already darted to the walls in an instant, walking up to the top in one go. Sword lights flashed, and all the archers who had reached their positions in a hurry cried out as they were pushed off the walls!

This was saint swordsman Rolf!

However, a Faelor saint was not a Norland saint. Once besieged by enemy troops, they were likely to die in regret. Norland's saints were level 18, comparable to country guardians in Faelor. On top of that, which saint in Norland did not have at least a few runes on them? Only they had the power to take on tens of thousands of troops alone.

While Rolf was conducting a massacre atop the city walls, Richard had covered the last hundred metres. A pull of the reins evoked a lengthy neigh from his warhorse as it changed directions, now moving diagonally to the front gates.

On horseback, Richard brandished the Twin of Destiny to shoot



out five fireballs in succession. Each spell landed in a precise position, exactly fifteen metres away from the last. With the boost from the staff, even these regular fireballs were quite powerful. Waves of fire covered the entire guard tower in an instant, with even Rolf drowned within!

This volley had covered an enormous area, but Richard knew its effects were limited. Rolf was protected by his saint-level energy, and Kellac had cast a magic resistance spell on him before the assault. The damage from the spells was minuscule; even the guards of Camp Bluesquare had experienced enough battles to react appropriately. They dropped to the ground the moment they saw the fireballs being launched, protecting their vulnerable heads. Thus, when the wave of heat passed, only those who were too close to the impacts had suffered any real damage.

However, this salvo had only been meant to gain time for the troops behind him. While the warriors at the top of the walls were busy, 200 throwers had already charged within twenty metres of the city!

“Rolf! Get away from the top!” Richard’s voice rang out, amplified with magic.

The saint’s sword was flashing around like the wind, every move sending blood flying as he killed to his heart’s content. All the ordinary soldiers atop the wall were forced to lie on their stomachs by the fireball, and now they were hastily trying to crawl up. For someone who took pride in his speed and technique, with the War Construct spell supporting him as well, they were basically sitting ducks.

A dozen men had died under his sword in an instant. Hence, a hint of hesitation appeared in his eyes when he heard Richard’s warning. He didn’t leave immediately, instead cutting off the head of another soldier with the back of his hand. He thought Richard was likely just going to bombard the top of the wall again, but with two divine spells on him even grade 6 spells he could resist at least

one wave of.

Even as he was hesitating, a feeling of extreme danger suddenly assaulted him. His expression changed instantly, his ears trembling as he heard an extremely sharp whistle rapidly growing closer. He didn't think for another moment, yelling as he flipped off the wall and into the camp.

CRASH! While still in the air, Rolf heard loud clunks on the wall. Everything suddenly went completely quiet, even the miserable cries silenced. The top of the walls had grown deathly still.

Thud! A booming sound finally broke the silence as the wooden guard tower abruptly collapsed.

The saint swordsman felt his throat go dry. What kind of attack could cause such a thing? This was a ruthless massacre!

Hurried sounds of flapping rang out in the sky and a huge bat flitted across the wall. "Stay close to the walls," Richard's voice sounded once more.

This time, he listened. Rolf pressed close to the city gate, ignoring the more than a hundred enemy warriors that were charging him at the same time. Another sharp whistle left his heart thumping in fear, the flying axes landing right amongst the troops defending behind the city gates. These bone axes that were the same size as hatchets had incredible power, even splitting some unlucky warriors apart. The closest axe had landed only five metres away from the city gates, the sharp wind causing Rolf's hair to fly!

He suddenly felt his scalp go numb. The hundred bloodthirsty warriors had been in front of him a moment ago, but now less than half of them could still stand after a wave.

Io rushed beneath the city as well, fluidly dismounting from his horse. He crossed his hands in front of his chest the moment he found his bearings, assuming a pious stance as though he were in a

shrine and starting to chant prayers. His singing voice rang with incantation after incantation, divine spells buffing the humanoids who were charging over.

The first batch of warriors had heavy steel lances in their hands. They threw these weapons towards the camp walls with a shout, embedding them deep into the structure leaving only a short section poking out. The lances thrown by two rows of warriors formed two rows of stairs that one could take to the top of the walls.

Gangdor, fully armoured and axe in hand, yelled as he rushed towards the walls. He charged over the top of the walls with the help of these new footholds, jumping into the camp on the other side. The ground shook slightly; he had landed on two feet. His signature bloodthirsty yell then resonated throughout the night sky!

Following Gangdor were five rows of humanoids with one-handed axes. With their level 9 strength, they faced no difficulty in using the footholds to get past the city walls that were only six metres tall.

The rest of the warriors behind the gates were killed in a few breaths, following which the gate to Camp Bluesquare was slowly pushed open.

All this had happened blazingly fast. While the alarm bell's chime was still resonating in the sky, the gates of the camp had already been broken through by Richard's thunderous methods. The warriors in the camp had only now darted out of their barracks, not even gathered into their formations.

Deep inside the camp, a powerful aura suddenly soared as a rough roar rang out, "Who is it that seeks death?!"

This roar alone was proof enough that this was a saint! A tall, sturdy man bathed in fire immediately rushed towards the city walls with big strides. He wielded a large steel spear, the speartip

similarly blazing with fiery energy. He fixed his eyes on Rolf who was atop the walls hundreds of metres away, eyes narrowing as he bellowed once more, “You shameless thing, what are you doing there with ordinary warriors? Get your ass over here and let me cut you up, you spineless bastard!”

Rolf’s face flashed with anger. This saint was stable at level 17, but he remained unafraid as he stepped out of the masses, dragging his sword on the floor. The tip produced numerous sparks.

The two saints rapidly drew close, but moments before they were about to clash Rolf suddenly showed a malicious grin. He took an exquisite scroll out of his pocket, quietly reading something out. The scroll suddenly produced an eye-catching lustre that enveloped the swordsman in his entirety.

The burly spearman was shocked, placing all his attention on Rolf. Temporarily blinded by the unexpected glimmer, he took two steps backwards and placed his lance across his body. The flames around him flickered as his energy radiated outwards; Rolf did not rival him, for the swordsman to act so assured evidently meant he was relying on this scroll.

The powerful light disappeared in the blink of an eye, leaving Rolf enveloped in shining armour that radiated a divine might. The sword in his hands had disappeared, replaced by a giant two-handed sword completely made of dark gold light. The blade had countless divine characters flowing across it.

The grin still on his face, Rolf flicked his wrists. The giant blade was quick as lightning, slashing downwards.

The opposing saint quickly retreated, the steel spear in his hand quickly meeting the attack. Sword and spear clanged, letting sparks fly loose. The burly man’s arms trembled, the power of this giant sword was so immense it was strange. This was definitely not a strength that Rolf could possess. The man was unable to repel it completely, forced back a few steps before he could regain his

foothold.

The burly man seemed overwhelmed. He then shot a glance at the giant sword in Rolf's hands, suddenly shouting in alarm, "A divine weapon!"

## Book 3, Chapter 89 - An Ambush In The Night(2)

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“You’re pretty knowledgeable! You should be honoured to get cut down by a divine weapon!” Rolf stepped forward as quick as lightning, the giant sword aimed right at the burly man’s heart. The huge weapon was no slower than Rolf’s original blade, emanating a holy lustre as it sliced at the man’s body like a gale.

A group of guards was charging across the city walls. Amongst them were experienced arbalists, protected by two level 12 warriors as they made a beeline for the ballistae. Their movements weren’t particularly quick, but even as the rest of the guards were only just entering formation they had already darted towards their positions.

However, a graceful figure suddenly appeared next to the charging group. Black gas flashed as the dazed head of a level 12 warrior separated from his body. The sounds of a crossbow rang out in the darkness, enchanted bolts flying out one after the other that took down a warrior each. Even saints could not withstand these bolts at close range, much less these common soldiers.

Having exhausted her quiver, Phaser appeared like a ghost from the shadows to stab every fallen soldier. Only after piercing their hearts with Extinction could she absorb their vitality and souls, so every shot she took had left these men within an inch of death.

While Phaser was busy stabbing, Waterflower finished killing the second level 12 warrior and melted into the night. She swiftly flew towards the men guarding the closest ballista.

At the same time, an incomparably tall and sturdy figure slowly floated in from outside the city walls to land next to the ballista. The vibrations from his landing left all the warriors nearby swaying; this fellow was a three-metre-tall giant! He suddenly crouched down, energy bursting forth as a wave of his enormous

arm sent seven or eight warriors flying.

Tammy, level 16 berserker. This was the saint Earl Yatu had sent to protect Zim, borrowed by Richard for the night's attack.

Waterflower's attacks were swift as the breeze, quickly killing off all the injured warriors. She then expended some effort to drag over an enchanted bolt with an explosive effect while Tammy activated all his energy to slowly draw the weapon that normally needed a dozen strong warriors on his own.

Click! Waterflower burst forth with surprising strength as well, slotting the giant bolt into the machine and beginning to adjust its pitch and yaw. Tammy then stepped down on the machine, the explosive bolt that was nearly four metres tall flying out like lightning. The bolt drew a stark red arc in the night sky, finally landing on another of the ballistae. A tremendous explosion rang out as berserking flames enveloped the siege weapon and its surrounding warriors, sending the arbalists who planned to fire it flying away.

Waterflower immediately dragged out another bolt, while Tammy roared once more and drew the machine.

Bright streaks of red flashed one after the other, creating twenty-metre explosions all over the city walls; A single exploding bolt was comparable to a grade 7 burst fireball. Tami and Waterflower worked together to launch a total of seven bolts, completely destroying the two remaining ballistae. The berserker was sweating profusely by the time they were done, crumpling to the ground devoid of all energy.

Zendrall and Demi had managed to keep one of the ballistae at bay during this time, but another had managed to launch a bolt towards Richard's army. Richard had ended up using one of the spells stored in the Book of Holding, six direbears turning into cannon fodder. It was the most accurate display of Nature's Beckon in his life; the beasts had been spawned accurately in mid-air to

intercept the bolt, their thick skin causing it to explode prematurely and lost most of its power.

The greatest threats of Camp Bluesquare had thus been removed.

Richard stayed seated on his warhorse, watching as groups of warriors with tower shields and axes walked out of the darkness towards the camp. 600 humanoids stepped in tune, the thunderous quaking of the earth under their boots leaving the enemy morale destroyed.

Following the humanoids were throwers, protected by another hundred humanoids of their own. At the centre of these throwers was Richard's group of spellcasters. Of course, Io and Flowsand acted alone. They coordinated with him for strategy, but they exercised a great amount of freedom in positioning. This was the same for any powerhouses.

The first group of defenders hastily charged out from the centre of the camp, meeting Richard's drone army head-on. However, the humanoids were born for slaughter; they did not roar, did not yell, did not even say a word as they robotically cut through enemy after enemy. Shields welcomed incoming blows, and any pause was used to brandish their axes once more. Every wave of the front row's axes sent blood and miserable cries into the sky. The formation of the humanoid heavy infantry opened up a bloodstained path through the swarm of enemies.

The front row of Richard's army glimmered with the lustre of divine spells and magic. On the other hand, the defenders of Camp Bluesquare were peppered with curses. Even a mass slow was enough to lead these guards into the abyss.

A crushing advantage in magic. A crushing advantage in the divine. A crushing advantage in powerhouses, and a crushing advantage in equipment. These humanoid warriors easily took on the attacks of the numerous enemies, marching constantly from the southern gate to the north.



A large number of desert warriors and barbarians followed the humanoids into the camp. They themselves were tailed by Zim's army, following the bloody path to the camp's centre. Minutes later, the troops belonging to the Direwolf Duke's vassals also started heading over. Richard eventually had an enormous 5000-man army trained on the defenders, overwhelming them entirely.

When the northern gate entered their sight, the guards of Camp Bluesquare finally broke down. They began fleeing everywhere, some not even bothering to push the obstruction that was the city gates as they climbed up the walls and jumped away.

With flames burning all of the camp, there was only one decisive battle left. It was the duel between Rolf and the burly spearman.

Rolf's War Construct spell had faded away, forcing the saint swordsman to depend entirely on his ability to contend with the opponent. The spearman was still as grand as before, but his body was littered with injuries. Rolf had done a good job depleting his energy over the duration of the War Construct spell as well. And yet, despite all that, the man was still yelling as he freely attacked Rolf; the saint swordsman was starting to look pathetic.

The spearman saw Richard right away. Although preoccupied with his own battle, he had still kept an eye on the situation elsewhere in the camp. He knew Richard was the commander of the enemy, immediately thinking of killing the young great mage with a single strike.

His desires would not come to fruition. Richard seemed to read his mind, dismounting and retreating ten metres with light steps before staring at him calmly.

The speed of the retreat caused the man's eyes to shrink. This was entirely different from the shifting spells most spellcasters used, but whatever it was it would not be easy to strike down the mage in his current state. It would be much better to take out Rolf with full strength. A little more effort and the weak swords saint

without the support of divine spells would be pierced through.

When Gangdor appeared by Richard's side, the spearman's eyelids twitched. He completely gave up on killing Richard, but next came Tiramisu, Kellac, Io, and Zendrall. Waterflower's silhouette flashed in the shadows, Phaser's presence felt in the darkness.

A divine spell landed on Rolf, immediately providing relief to his injured body. The healing spell had arrived at a great time, the spearman's eyes widening to the point that they almost bulged out of their sockets. The clerics and mages started working together to cover Rolf's body in healing radiance and an unknown number of buffs. Black and green light flashed on the burly man's body as well, striking him down with a bunch of curses.

It was only then that Richard finally spoke up, "Just surrender!"

The man laughed heartily, "Richard! Look at me, do you think I will surrender?"

Richard stayed silent for a moment and then sighed, "Fine then, I'll send you on."

He raised his left arm and ten Archeron warriors flashed out of the darkness with an enchanted crossbow in hand. The Twin of Destiny waved around, a lightning bolt falling from the skies. The powerful current from the grade 7 spell left even this powerful saint shaking, his movements going stiff.

The tiny opening was used perfectly by the experienced Archeron soldiers. Enchanted bolts flew out through the night sky, seven or eight striking him and deeply embedding into his body!

The man roared, exploding with energy; a circle with his spear forced everyone surrounding him to retreat several steps. Only then did he prop his weapon on the ground and lean against it, taking a look around. Three more laughs and his head finally hung down.

Even in death, he stood tall.

Level 17 saint Tidor Fenton had died in battle at Camp Bluesquare.

Richard stood silent for a moment before turning to Kellac who was familiar with such things, “Who is he?”

“This should be Eal Lambert’s brother Tidor,” the fallen priest answered, “However, he has his own businesses. We did not receive any news of him entering the Bloodstained Lands, I don’t know why he is here.”

“We’re provoking more and more powerful people. I don’t know if that’s good or bad.”

Flowsand seemed to think of something and sighed slowly, “This... It is a path that every powerhouse has to carve.”

Richard nodded, gazing at Camp Bluesquare that was still riddled with fires and earth-shaking cries in a daze, “We won tonight and Tidor has become my stepping stone. If I lose in battle I’ll probably end up as a stepping stone for someone else, no?”

His followers all went silent. Most of them had come from Norland and they knew about the cruelty of planar warfare.

## Book 3, Chapter 90 - The Bloodstained Path

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Flowsand was the first to regain her cheer, “Don’t think so far ahead. Didn’t we win this one?”

“That’s true!” Richard laughed. He was their leader; if he was in low spirits himself, how would he guide the rest?

Zendrall walked out of the group and pointed to the still-towering Tidor, “Master, this corpse...”

Richard creased his brows, “Tidor was a true fighter...”

“Most saints are true fighters!” the necromancer emphasized. However, these words caused Rolf’s face to warm up for some reason. Seeing Richard still wanting to say more, Zendrall hastily added, “My Lord! If you want to respect true warriors, I will never have any death knights!”

Richard hesitated for a moment before finally letting out a sigh and nodding his head. On this plane where a crisis awaited at every step, the first priority was to grow his might. He could not lessen his followers’ chances of survival just because of his respect for his enemies.

Zendrall immediately grew excited. A wave of his hand and four warriors of darkness walked out from a spell formation, carrying Tidor’s corpse outside the barracks area.

Richard leapt onto his horse and began patrolling through Camp Bluesquare, assisting his troops in the clean-up operations. At the same time, he issued for one of his elite humanoid warriors to enter the command tent back in their own camp.

The spacious tent was filled with intoxicated laughter. Most of the noble commanders were immersed in their drink, jokes, stories, legends, and even boasting. Even Zim was skipping around, bragging about his own valour and wisdom as well as the number of young noblewomen he had won over.

“Sir Richard orders everyone to head to Camp Bluesquare,” the elite humanoid stated stiffly, “My Lord says it might rain tonight, so everyone should reach the camp at the earliest so they can avoid catching a cold.”

The drone’s voice was strange and completely monotonous, sounding absolutely terrible. However, its words resonated in the ears of the noble captains. There was no reaction from anyone for a moment, but those who were yet to become fully drunk suddenly leapt up and exclaimed, “He already conquered Camp Bluesquare?!”

A moment later, many of the captains were aroused from their trance. The army packed up, setting off for Camp Bluesquare. As the tipsy nobles saw the embers yet to be extinguished all over the camp, each and every one of them couldn’t help but look dumbstruck. Everyone capable of standing here knew at least some things about leading an army into war. They quickly calculated how much time had passed since Richard left their camp, glancing at the remnants of the camp’s defences as they watched more than 2,000 prisoners of war being herded outside the barracks to be held captive. For a moment, it felt like they were in a dream.

He won just like that? Richard had only been gone for a short while, with only enough time for a tryst with a young lady in the forest.

They still didn’t know that Tidor had died in this battle as well. The death of any saint was bound to become a topic of conversation in high society for a long time. Defeating a saint wasn’t all that hard, but killing them was. This was particularly true in small-scale duels; if the saint was set on escaping, one would need several times their power to pin them down. However, things grew complicated in the ever-changing battlefield. All sorts of terrain, tactics, magic, and weaponry became variables that could seriously injure or even kill a saint that was not careful enough. Thus, Faelor’s saints rarely appeared in the line of fire on

a battlefield. Even if they did, it would be to contend against the saints of the enemy.

Regardless of the astonishment, Camp Bluesquare had already landed in Richard's hands. Barely a day had passed since the start of the project; there were nine more until the day came when they would be given a chance to make their decisions.

The army rested and reorganised at Camp Bluesquare for a day, most of that time spent on checking the loot and dividing it. The gains were in the form of the prisoners of war, slaves, the one remaining ballista, and Camp Bluesquare itself. The camp's value lay in the fact that it had a water source.

Although Richard had basically conquered the camp on his own, he still split the gains strictly according to their initial agreement. This won a chorus of cheers from most of the aristocrats; it had not yet dawned on them that they would no longer have any reason to refuse a dispatch of their own soldiers.

Throughout the next day, these captains who did not manage to see the battle were constantly discussing the results. 5,000 attackers matched against just under 4,000 guards, leaving more than a thousand dead and two thousand captive. Only a few hundred had escaped, while less than a hundred people had died on Richard's side. Two or three hundred had sustained minor injuries; most of the casualties were caused to the infantry that had entered the city halfway through the battle. In fact, most of the deaths and injuries had come from the one ballista bolt that had exploded mid-air. And yet, despite that, the ratio of casualties was completely beyond their imagination. With their current military knowledge, these men would never be able to deduce exactly what had happened.

Richard naturally knew of the discussion as well, but he dismissed it with a laugh. These fellows were just used to wars in Faelor, and didn't know how formidable the collective power of a large-enough troop of high-ranking warriors empowered with

buffs could be. The power of magic had already been rooted in the heart of Norland's people long ago. If not for that, rune knights would never have emerged.

Richard had a total of 700 level 9 warriors on hand, as well as 200 level 8 throwers.

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Dawn of the third day, the army continued on their journey. After an entire day's march, they arrived at the Groundbreaking Canyon.

This place produced cloudfire ore in abundance. There were tens of influences here of all scales mining the ore, with armed confrontations almost every month. Those who could survive this place were not to be trifled with.

At the same time, the terrain of the canyon was extremely complex with countless creatures roaming the caves. It was said that the depths of the caves connected to the dark regions, which was why there seemed to be an endless stream of underground creatures charging out. Although they were mostly cavemen without much intelligence, they were each comparable to an able-bodied man in the prime of his life. They knew how to use simple tools and weapons as well. Once their numbers grew large enough, they would become a headache.

Once they entered the vicinity of the Groundbreaking Canyon, Richard let his troops rest for a day. Morning of the fourth day, he led his troops in a charge right into the canyon. He advanced steadily through the battle striking hard while moving carefully with every step. Companies went into battle one after the other, the rows of heavily armed warriors backed by spells like gigantic meat grinders as they mercilessly destroyed the horde of weak enemies.

If one were to look over from the sky, Richard's army seemed to be a current of steel that rolled forward in an unhurried yet

unstoppable manner. spurts of blood kept staining the ground in front of the current, leaving a bloodstained path behind.

Richard was in the midst of the frontlines, taking charge in the most meticulous and detailed manner. Every squad of warriors who grew tired or was injured was quickly replaced by one that was rested.

This was a battle of attrition, taking five long hours before they could finally make their way out. Richard had remained the most precise alchemic machine throughout, not making a single mistake in his commands with the tone of his voice the exact same as when they had begun. Even the occasional deaths of the unskilled soldiers of the other nobles were compensated for, the meat grinder not stopping for one moment.

When the army was done, the valley floor of Groundbreaking Canyon was already covered in dark red blood.

On the seventh day, Richard's army entered the Khanba Gobi. This was already more than a hundred kilometres away from Bluewater Oasis, the homeland of the desert warriors. Here, they were ambushed by roaming horsemen.

Richard had transferred the entirety of his elite cavalry to the frontlines by this time, also bringing along the barbarian soldiers whose mobility was not one whit inferior to cavalymen. With less than a thousand men facing off against 5,000 desert horsemen, an adrenaline-pumping battle ensued in a battlefield that stretched across tens of kilometres. By the time his troops broke through the desert people's formation for the third time, the enemies lost all morale as they abandoned more than a thousand corpses to flee in all directions.

On the tenth day, Richard's army had arrived at the Cracked Canyon. This was the base of the orcs in the Bloodstained Lands, with tens of thousands of powerful orcs living here. When he ordered his troops to enter the battlefield, an endless horde rushed



towards them!

Every adult orc was a decent warrior. The youths and elderly weren't weak either, with every individual able to fight on some level. However, Richard showed these orcs the power of an iron wall strengthened by magic.

He arranged all of his troops in extremely tight formations, the front rows resisting the attacks with all their might while the spellcasters in the back poured magic onto the enemy. Fire and acid burned the enemies, while the clerics constantly cast vitality spells on the mages to restore their mana quicker.

Rows of flames burned incessantly. In situations like this, Fireball and Wall of Fire were extremely effective spells. Richard had already changed out Nature's Beckon for the latter in his Book of Holding. These barely-armoured orcs could not resist such powerful magic, relying purely on their valiance to step through the sea of fire and suffer the burns as they charged into the line of battle against the human infantry.

The orcs had basically no equipment or strategy, forget clerics and mages. Their shamans were dancing crazily, but the boost to the warriors was essentially negligible. Richard had even cast a detection spell at the beginning of the battle to analyze their prayers, finding that Faelor's ancestral worship was weaker even than magic. It was no wonder that the ultimate goal of these ancestors was to become a true god.

This was truly an arduous and extraordinary battle. Flesh, blood, and weapons scattered all around as the enchanted flames seemed to never flicker, the radiance of the spells gradually seeming dim. Individual power was crushed here; assassins like Waterflower and Phaser didn't dare leave the protection of the frontlines lest they get torn into pieces by the angry orcs.

A war like this was Io's stage to shine. Never before had the battle priest achieved such glory, a wave of his hand able to rescue

countless warriors. Without the boost from his spells, the heavy infantrymen who were already struggling with extreme fatigue for so long would have been left unable to withstand the orcs' wild and violent attacks.

This was the first time Richard didn't feel like Io's radiance was an eyesore.

In fact, his own role in the battle was no less significant than Io's. However, he didn't want others to notice that, deliberately ignoring it himself as well. Throughout the entire battle, he had merely been repeating a single spell: Wall of Fire. With the empowerment of the Twin of Destiny, the wall had doubled in size and burnt longer with more strength. Given the vitality spell and his own rune, his mana restoration was incomparably rapid. On top of that, the second leaf from his elven bloodline had shown its ability: accelerated mana restoration.

The walls of fire were an effective weapon that reaped countless of lives. Richard's gift of Truth was constantly collecting statistics on the orcs who had died to his spells, and the numbers shown in front of him were cruel.

When even the fearless orcs began to cry in anguish at the casualties, Richard issued the order for the final attack. His cavalry flanked behind the enemy on the battlefield, striking right through the rear of the orcs and wiping out the exhausted shamans. This blow set the outcome in stone; the orcs finally collapsed.

The enemies fled everywhere, but Richard had no more energy to press the attack. However, even if he could he did not wish to. Everyone was silent after the battle, staring at the tragic scene of the battlefield. The scorched bodies of the orcs had piled up in layers, with it being near impossible to count exactly how many there were. The corpses of humans and orc alike mingled together at the intersection of the frontlines, soaked in acid, burned by fire, tainted by blood. There was almost no distinguishing between the two.

This was the first time that Richard did not insist on clearing the entire battlefield on his own. He instead left without giving any orders, allowing those under him to handle the situation on their own.

In this battle, the young great mage had fully displayed the combination of his own magic and the power of his command, but he left with a grave number. From beginning to end, he had cast more than thirty walls of fire. The number of orc warriors that died to these enchanted flames: 1061.

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After the battle, all of the nobles agreed to leave and pitch their tents a little further away from the Cracked Canyon. A few unlucky ones were chosen by ballot, responsible for cleaning up the orcs' camps.

In the end, they brought back a heap of idols of all sizes, something Richard had specifically demanded and appointed Olar to supervise. The elven bard was responsible and diligent, bringing back every one that he could.

Most surprising was that one of these statues was of a beast god, containing formidable power. Flowsand evaluated that it was at such a high standard that it could be presented as an offering.

After taking the Cracked Canyon, Richard began to rest and reorganise the military as he settled down in the camp. This was the first battle in which more than a thousand of his men had died, with 2,000 more injured. It was clear just how tragic the battlefield was; he wanted to wait for the reinforcements to catch up so he could select new warriors to replenish the troops. He also had to wait and see if these nobles wanted to back out.

The results were beyond Richard's expectations. Despite the tragic war at the Cracked Canyon, not one of the nobles was willing to withdraw their soldiers. They also unanimously requested for Richard to slow down the pace of the march so they

could request reinforcements from their families.

## Book 3, Chapter 91 - The Bloodstained Path(2)

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Almost every one of the nobles proposed absolutely ridiculous reinforcement plans. The numbers were extremely high, no different from them turning out in full strength. Although those present did not have high ranks, every family here had connections with the greater nobles of the Sequoia Kingdom. Names of powerful houses who had long-term residences in the Kingdom's capital started flowing from each of their mouths.

Zim was the most enthusiastic of them all. Not only did he clamour about wanting to empty out all of his old man's family property, but he also considered involving Duke Grasberg himself. He even spoke of asking his mother for royal knights. The Viscount even swore to sleep with Countess Katrina for a month after the project if she would agree to back him up with 300 elite cavalrymen.

In the end, Richard couldn't help but smack Zim's head with his staff, finally putting a stop to the Viscount's wild fantasies.

Right now, everyone present only cared for the mountain of wealth should the Bloodstained Highway succeed, even if their own share of the pie was small. The best way in their eyes was to grow the scale of the army, making it easier to conquer the entire Bloodstained Lands.

If things really did go according to their plans, the number of troops dispatched would almost be on par with a war fought by the entire kingdom; how absurd would that be? Something so insane seemed to grow more and more probable to these nobles by the day. Richard had been named the god of war of the Sequoia Kingdom's current generation!

However, Richard himself was aware that these ideas were not feasible at all. Even ignoring the threshold beyond which his

control of the battlefield would suffer, 10,000 was an extremely strenuous number of men to support. If the army continued to expand, Richard would lose more and more control.

Besides, these were the Bloodstained Lands. An army of 100,000 men would face enormous amounts of pressure for supplies; even before they got to the Ashen Plateau, they were likely to starve to death.

These red-eyed nobles hadn't even considered the political factors. The intervention of the truly powerful houses would completely shuffle up this tenuous alliance, and that didn't even encompass the reactions from the various other countries bordering the Bloodstained Lands. One had to think of the fact that Richard was still a mere knight. An alliance between a few nobles was completely different from one on the level of a country.

Richard curbed these overly enthusiastic men, starting to discuss reinforcements seriously. Although he kept increasing the requirements, eventually asking for veterans who were level 4 at minimum with robust equipment and their own supplies, these nobles still managed to pool together an army of 20,000. He was left with no choice but to forcefully distribute the number of slots offered to each noble, only willing to accept the ten thousand warriors of the best quality.

From Bluewater Oasis to the Cracked Canyon; Richard had won four great wars in a mere ten days. However, these nobles ended up quarrelling over the allocation for an entire week.

While the nobles were fighting non-stop over the allocation of the army, Richard began to select new warriors from the rearguard and his stronger slaves. He had lost many men over the course of the past few battles, and he needed to replenish his army. The desert warriors and barbarians were all good fighters; although their loyalty was a little questionable, they weren't much worse than the nobles' personal armies.

Grabbing onto the rare break, Richard started reflecting on his capabilities. Two days after the war had ended, he locked himself up in his tent and began a deep analysis.

Everything seemed to be on the right track. He had a growing number of options moving forward, no longer stuck in the desperate situation he had initially been trapped in when they first entered Faelor. However, new problems had begun to show themselves; he needed to plan for the future to optimise the boost to his ability.

His followers had gradually found their own paths, gradually starting to show their power. Ever since he had realised the intrinsic difference between Norland and Faelor lay in the existence of runes, he had already given them an unprecedented priority. Both Waterflower and Gangdor now had their own rune sets, protecting them as they charged into the frontlines and massacred their opponents. This was why they had been chosen first. With Breath of Darkness and Savage Strike, the two could possibly win against a weaker saint of Faelor if they joined forces.

The original core of the team had lain in Flowsand and himself, but Richard was still extremely unsure of what path he should take. Bloodlines, runes, magic, martial arts... he had too many choices, and every direction had its own advantages. This made it difficult for him to finalise his decision. On the other hand, Flowsand's circumstances were the exact opposite. She was worthy of her title in every way, possessing extraordinary wisdom, talent, and resourcefulness that exceeded his own. Her rune capacity was all the more exceptional, something that put him in a dilemma.

He was currently limited by his own level, unable to craft true grade 3 runes until he hit level 16. However, anything he could incorporate into a grade 2 rune was ultimately unable to exhibit the true power of the Mystic Glory set he had designed especially for her.

The only things he had done so far were to redo her grade 1 rune

to grade 2 and add another that boosted her casting speed.

Deepblue Fragment, a rune he had been inspired to design after unleashing the astral affinity of his elven bloodline. It was a rune designed to simulate his bloodline's properties, something far more difficult to do in a grade 2 rune than in grade 3. The rune was similar to Life's Bane, the difficulty laying in the complexity and precision instead of one's level in magic.

However, the true origin of the Deepblue Fragment rune was the Deepblue Aria on Sharon's body. Only after he had become a true runemaster did Richard gain the ability to perceive a small portion of the Deepblue Aria's capabilities. However, if he could currently see a tree's worth the full version of the Deepblue Aria was as vast as the Forest Plane.

Richard maintained his main principle of not interfering with the direction his followers took. However, he would occasionally measure their strengths and design some runes to boost their abilities and maximise their combat power.

Thinking about it, Richard found that most of his followers were inclined towards magic now; only Gangdor could charge through enemy lines in the midst of a magnificent army. Medium Rare was originally more suited to the task than Gangdor, but he had been killed by Blackwing. Although Richard had avenged the ogre somewhat, Red Cossack itself was still around alongside their backer, Marquess Yang. He would not let the matter rest yet.

There were still major uncertainties as to Tiramisu's path, but one could only wait for the ogre mage's second head to grow out and unlock his affinities. As a result, even if he wished to Richard couldn't give the ogre many runes. Although old runes could still be upgraded, it was extremely troublesome and painful to remove them if the properties clashed. Faelor's culture wasn't at the point where their alchemists could synthesise the required potions.

Besides that, it was hard to say whether runes designed for



humans would cause any harmful changes to ogres. The higher the grade of a rune, the more the demand on the bearer's body. Norland's runemasters had thoroughly figured out the human anatomy over the past few millennia, runecrafting now a matured profession. However, there was nearly no precedent with regards to runes for ogres. Humanoids seldom used runes in the first place, but even bred warriors with non-human bloodlines normally used human runes directly. No runemaster had considered adapting runes to any other species.

Then there was Demi who had just joined, as well as Wennington and Venica who might participate in the future.

Richard realised that he truly had an excess of spellcasters around him. On the other hand, he didn't have too many powerful warriors. However, if he shared these troubles publicly he would likely be severely reprimanded.

A warrior was far inferior to a mage or cleric, especially in Faelor. Even someone with great status like Odom would be respectful and deferential when addressing a spellcaster. However, it was this same status that made mages a rare sight in armies unless it was a war between kingdoms. Faelor's churches were actually ahead in this regard: the power of battle priests and paladins collaborating definitely made them more powerful than a regular troop of knights.

Richard originally had a decent impression of Faelor's battle priests, but every one he had seen seemed to be an idiot when compared to Io. If not for that hateful fellow as well as the remainder of his ten-odd mages and clerics, his 10,000 men would not have defeated thrice their number so easily at the Cracked Canyon. However, the strength those orcs had displayed was making him reassess the importance of high-level warriors.

This was actually how a trained army was built. Richard already had a decent number of troops under him, slowly raising their quality bit by bit. With the humanoid drones getting replenished

in large quantities, he was growing more and more reliant on elite troops. At a certain scale, they grew unimaginably powerful. Take the battle at Camp Bluesquare, for example; the formation of humanoids had pushed the defenders all the way from the south gate to the north without so much as slowing down.

## Book 3, Chapter 92 - Path To Power

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The broodmother was definitely the core of his army. Richard was slowly realising more and more just how true Ferlyn's words had been when she said the broodmother was a powerful weapon in planar wars. With her around, he was bound to have an endless army in his hand sooner or later. Why would he let her go into battle personally? He already could use his army to trap the enemy powerhouses and render them dead.

If he could use the terrain to stop someone like Odom from fleeing, his spellcasters could then disrupt the enemy while the humanoids ground away at their energy. When a barrage of ranged attacks from the outer circle drowned out the enemy, Richard would only lose a few dozen warriors in exchange for the chance to finish them off on the spot. Besides, even if the enemy survived the initial volley he still had the elite humanoids and free Archerons with enchanted crossbows to bring to bear.

With the army set up, he had to think of his own commandership. The blessings of wisdom and truth had truly been rewarding—he hadn't yet met anyone who could compare to him in terms of tactical control—but before his blessing of wisdom had levelled up he had been limited to being able to shadow and command fifty targets simultaneously. Even if he made use of his second mind, that would only add five more troops at most. The difficulties were starting to show with his current army, his precision and control over the situation weakened. The most ideal case for him was a war between about 1,000 elites on each side.

He was someone who used the tactics of a wolf pack, controlling the scale of every battle before engaging in an endless series of skirmishes to tear away at his opponents bit by bit. He did not need an advantage in numbers; he could basically guarantee victory in a fight against two equal armies.

However, the biggest problem right now was his individual

power. Richard was primarily a mage, most of his strength in battle focused around his spells. His Archeron and elven bloodlines supported that somewhat, the latter divided into five separate affinities to nature, restoration, the moon, the astral, and the elements. His abilities had been unlocked by luck before, but now things were different. The Deepblue Fantasy actually allowed him to choose which bloodline to strengthen and how, giving him the option to unlock specific abilities. It truly was worthy of coming from Sharon herself.

His problem now was in choosing which bloodline he had to strengthen first. The restoration affinity prioritised his ability to heal, while the elemental affinity would grow his elemental spells. The former didn't brook much discussion at all, while the latter wasn't indispensable either. Without an infinite supply of astral rays to boost his bloodline, he couldn't just distribute them evenly. He would only consider the elemental affinity when his mana pool was approaching its peak.

The moon affinity would strengthen his moonforce and by extension the power of the secret swords of Silvermoon. This wasn't a must either. On the other hand, the nature affinity was different. Nature's Beckon was one of his staple spells, and the affinity would directly boost its powers. On top of that, it would increase his harmony with the environment, especially in forest and grassland areas. This would resonate with his blessing of Truth, sharpening his instincts and his sense for danger. These unremarkable areas were extremely useful, collectively worth much more than a simple boost to his fireballs.

And then there was the astral affinity. Two branches were already growing out of the main trunk, a fresh leaf on each branch. Richard had already fully experienced the combined might of this affinity with the Deepblue Fantasy before, so he was currently transferring every astral ray he could to the bloodline. Although this slowed his growth for now, that slowdown was well worth the

permanent boost to his growth rate that the affinity would grant him.

Just like Io had said, level was still the most important indicator of one's capabilities. He believed the battle priest would be in for a huge surprise when the astral affinity was strengthened to a certain extent.

And then there was the Archeron bloodline, something that gave him a headache. The lava flowing in his blood had seemingly endless secrets hidden within. His luck so far had been half-decent; although Eruption wasn't worth much, Blaze was definitely a powerful ability. However, he did not know what ability he would unlock next. There were hundreds of possibilities with the Archeron bloodline, and although Blaze truly was great that meant nothing for what his next one would be. There was no lack of examples of people forced to switch classes after unlocking a truly powerful ability in the family; it was said that the bloodline inherited from demons carried over its chaotic properties as well.

A question suddenly popped into Richard's mind. He wondered what Gatón's bloodline ability was; nobody had ever brought it up before. Regardless, he decided to ignore the Archeron Bloodline in favour of the astral ability. Level may not be everything, but it was a prerequisite for many tasks.

With that choice made, the only thing he had left to look at was his close-combat abilities. Richard had no expertise in this field whatsoever, but there were still a few paths for him to take. The secret swords, assassination techniques, and even the clerical martial arts were all worthy choices. However, he did not have too much time to spend on this matter at all. Any martial arts that required training his body for extended periods of time did not suit him.

Richard pondered over it for a long time, but he couldn't come to any conclusion. Instead, he was distracted by a random thought as a fundamental issue popped up in his mind: what exactly did being

powerful entail? What kind of path did one take to obtain power?

Richard had seen numerous powerhouses in his life, greatest of which was his own master. Sharon always behaved in a quirky manner, and while he knew she was powerful he had no idea exactly how much. The only basis he had to estimate her strength was the rune on her body, the Deepblue Aria. Although incomplete, this was a grade 6 rune! It was still a mystery exactly what kind of power the rune possessed, but his master was a perfect blend of an unimaginable bloodline, powerful runes, and divine talent. Nyris had also let slip that the mage wasn't even human, instead hailing from a formidable race. It was simply impossible for her to lack power.

Thus, after some thought, he eliminated Sharon as a role model. There was no way for someone like him to replicate her path.

Next came Gaton, Mordred, and Beye. Gaton's capabilities remained a mystery to him, mostly because he actively abstained from learning anything about the man. However, he had a good impression of Mordred who had come to fetch him when he was young. The man was quiet yet powerful, but even here Richard had no specific idea. Still, one could get an idea of his power from the tone and expression others had when they called him the Devil King in private. Even the rest of Gaton's knights seemed to subtly fear him.

Although they had only met once, Beye had left an extremely deep impression on Richard's mind. He discovered that her aura was similar to Mordred's, the only difference being that Mordred chose to hide his. Fuschia's response that night indicated the woman could fight well above her level... Perhaps she was the best ideal for the path he should take. Richard had no way to understand Gaton and Mordred for now, but that was not true in her case. He had an opening to study her from: Life's Bane.

Richard retrieved the Life's Bane blueprint and studied it carefully under the magic light. He was already thoroughly

familiar with the composition of the rune, and knew exactly how to craft it in theory. It was just that most of the lines required him to gather large amounts of mana that his current mana pool could not support.

In fact, the blueprint was actually quite useful. Even the encrypted parts of the magic arrays that made up the rune were annotated on it, making comprehending the rune's working much easier.

All nonstandard runes were unique to the runemasters crafting them, even if they had the same effect. Many runemasters added useless distractions to throw off anyone trying to copy their runes, but there was a more brilliant way of stopping others from imitating one's runes. That was to encrypt a portion of the arrays that made up the rune, inserting useless formulae that made the rune difficult to reverse engineer. The trick was used often in powerful custom runes, making it difficult to decipher exactly how the runes worked. If one's mathematics was advanced enough, they could make their runes effectively impossible to decipher, needing hundreds of years to resolve. This was a timescale where trying to analyse another runemaster's creations became useless. One could as well just design the thing themselves.

For most runemasters, imitation was a loss-making endeavour. If they had no creativity, they were fated to live out their lives crafting standard runes. Without the skill to craft higher-grade runes, a vast mana pool was useless. Encrypting runes was just an act done to prevent extraordinary runes from being duplicated by ordinary mages.

Of course, Life's Bane was one such extraordinary rune. However, the blueprint Beye had given him also had instructions to decipher the encrypted formulae with. Given his intelligence, Richard was easily able to decode the functions of the rune. In fact, the true difficulty of this rune lay in its overbearing demand for precision when it came to the overlaying function. That did not

pose a problem for him, so he was only limited by his level as a mage.



## Book 3, Chapter 93 - Path To Power(2)

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Richard didn't find anything new even after looking through Life's Bane multiple times. There was one suspicion that he had never managed to resolve. Beye was a terrifyingly powerful individual, why did she care so much about this rune? Grand Duke Ironblood was a wealthy man; forget grade 3 runes, he had to have many grade 4 runes in stock. And given her strength, Beye definitely wasn't an ordinary child.

Why did she have to have Life's Bane? Was it just for the ability to stack?

He suddenly thought back to those pure white eyes, that terrifying aura that left people wanting to scream. That power, that lethal presence... Who knows how many people one had to kill to get to that level?

Looking at Life's Bane again, his gaze was now somewhat different. He no longer tried to analyse the structure, instead trying to peer into the thoughts behind its design. In other words, he was searching for the rune's soul.

An unknown amount of time later, Richard shut his eyes. Beye's silhouette appeared in his mind's eye, a Life's Bane rune already on each arm. She was going through many attacking motions, her movements and power enhanced by the runes. He then began to simulate the true power of the Life's Bane rune, overlaying them one after the other. A second, third, fourth, and even fifth rune suddenly made its way onto each hand!

He didn't realise when exactly his expression had changed. As the simulation progressed, Beye's lethality far surpassed what could be encompassed by just 'terrifying'! Every opponent she faced in the simulation had turned into a rain of blood that filled the sky. She moved forward step by step, her pace not changing in the slightest as she left a trail of blood through countless enemies.

He suddenly opened his eyes, only to find sweat dripping down from his forehead. That path of blood had finally shown him the soul of Life's Bane. He knew now that his biggest priority was lethality!

He immediately made some adjustments to his second mind, focusing it completely on analysing the clerical martial arts. He would combine the elven secret swords with his bloodline abilities, even fusing some magic within. What he needed most was to defeat the enemy, the method unimportant. The martial arts from the Church of the Eternal Dragon far surpassed the elven swords in terms of profundity. They would serve well as a foundation upon which to build all his other techniques. However, few people in the past had done things this way.

He had finally sorted out his future path. Externally, he would continue to establish his own influence with his followers as the foundation, developing on his army control with the broodmother's drones at the core. Internally, he would pursue the path Mordred and Beye did, growing his level while strengthening his lethality before anything else. With this clear, he could ignore many matters that were of little importance.

Richard got up, taking a deep breath. His confidence had been regained.

.....

Only after walking out of the tent did Richard realise that it was already dawn. He had actually spent an entire night pondering. The brilliance of dawn was gradually filling the horizon, some of the early-rising nobles already walking about the camp.

While Richard was up to his ears in work regarding their next move, these nobles weren't idling either. The fight over the troop distribution had already turned white-hot; the negotiation table was another battlefield to these trained men, in fact one that they were better at fighting in. However, every noble knew that

everything on top of the table changed hands underneath; there was a lot of effort put in outside of the actual discussions.

Two nobles were walking in his direction, privately discussing something in whispers. Contrary to expectations, both of them had dark circles under bloodshot eyes. They evidently hadn't slept well. The pair greeted him warmly when they approached him before leaving in a hurry; it seemed like they were looking for a place to continue their discussion.

All the nobles had come to understand Richard's style during their association with him. He always gave them an overall plan, leaving the specifics of the distribution for them to fight for. Instead of wasting their time on him, they might as well form cliques in private.

Although the nobles contributed a majority of the troops, Richard still took a quarter of the profits. However, now there was nobody expressing unhappiness; they all thought it was only right.

Richard called over two elite humanoids, having them take a hundred of their kin and fifty throwers to load the orcish idols as well as other junk from the altars that were contaminated by divinity into big carriages. He soon sent them to escort these carriages to the borders of the Land of Turmoil.

This caravan held more than fifty idols, able to provide at least twenty units of divinity for the broodmother; she only needed one to get to level 6. He just had some doubts in his mind: why did the broodmother need divinity for her evolution at all?

There was a certain implication behind it, but he hadn't figured it out yet.

Now, there was only one idol left to settle.

The other nobles hadn't even bothered with discussion when Richard had taken these statues, allowing him to have them all. In their eyes, these crude constructions of wood and stone only had a

little worth as art pieces. Even then, orcish and human aesthetics did not match well; these idols would not sell for a high price. The nobles just assumed Richard had a peculiar taste.

Of course, Richard and Flowsand weren't collectors. The worth of these idols could be reflected in just one word: offering.

He inspected the idol once more before returning to his tent. Muttering to himself for a moment, he eventually started writing a letter to the Direwolf Duke.

‘Your Grace:

‘I presume you’re still worried over Perrin’s condition. Luckily, I found an orcish idol during the Bloodstained Highway Project that has been worshipped by tens of thousands of orcs for a long time. It barely makes the standard of an offering, but it can be used for a sacrificial ceremony.

‘Indeed, a sacrifice. I will be returning to Bluewater in the near future, where I will await reinforcements. I believe we will have the time then to hold a sacrificial ceremony. If Perrin is present and is lucky enough, he might receive another extension of time.

‘In addition, I am very interested in purchasing any rare minerals you have in your warehouse. I will provide adequate compensation in the form of high-quality magic equipment, equal in grade to what Lord Moonbear returned with recently. I strictly control the flow into most hands, but of course, there will be no such restriction on you. I hear you were drained a lot in the recent war; hopefully, this equipment can strengthen your army further.

‘At least for the foreseeable future, our interests are tightly bound together. I hope for our alliance to be unbreakable.’

Finished with the letter, Richard sent a few light cavalrymen to deliver it back to Bluewater at top speed. A long-range communications array had been incorporated into his residence, able to transmit this letter immediately to the Direwolf Duke for 10

magic crystals.

Having sent the letter, Richard heaved a long sigh. He had finally changed his tactics, deciding to arm the Direwolf Duke. With the situation in Norland as it was, it was extremely important for him to form powerful alliances in Faelor. The only way to save himself on both sides of the portal was to expand his own power as much as possible. The Direwolf Duke's support was currently crucial to him.

Richard finally regained the mood to study the situation. Having rested and reorganised at the Cracked Canyon for an entire week, the nobles still hadn't come up with a proper distribution for the spoils of war. He was appalled by the lack of efficiency.

He could easily set up an optimal distribution based on the contributions of all parties involved, but the problem was that these nobles definitely would not accept it directly. To them, every hundred soldiers was a large heap of gold! Only after a long period of draining negotiations would the split-up possess any real credibility. Of course, they would find that the final result hardly differed from his original suggestions.

He shook his head, returning to his own tent to meditate. He saw a small violet ray this time, so quick and agile that it was extremely difficult to capture. His meditation technique had records of it; this was a grade 3 astral ray, more than ten times as effective as an ordinary blue ray. A sufficient number of rays could possibly even unlock special effects, but it was near impossible to find these without luck.

Richard tried to catch the ray a few times, even emptying his mind once before trying again, but the wisp was just too fast. It disappeared every few minutes after it showed itself, unseen for an unknown period of time.

He quickly changed tracks, no longer futilely relying on luck as he instead tried to calculate the trajectory of the ray's flight. With

his profound achievements in mathematics, he would be able to figure out the trajectory in a moment of its arrival. He stopped chasing the ray with his soul, instead positioning himself to intercept the ray's flight.

The violet ray was thus pulled into his consciousness, but he couldn't manage to direct it towards his astral affinity trunk. It fused into his mana pool instead, but then he felt a sudden burst of energy in his second mind. The power of his new consciousness seemed to have actually increased! The grade 3 astral rays could actually upgrade the new mind? The discovery practically made him wild with joy!

## Book 3, Chapter 94 - Three Goddesses

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As much as he hoped for it, Richard didn't come across another violet ray during his meditation. The tome for the Deepblue Fantasy had already made it clear that these kinds of astral rays were rare and short-lived, but each one increased his mana at an unbelievable rate. Unlike most others, he could also calculate the trajectories and catch basically every ray he saw.

Given enough time, it was possible to catch up to Sharon's footsteps.

However, this aspiration was suddenly dampened by the realisation that the legendary mage who often wandered between planes was far more capable than him. How was it possible for her to miss these grade 3 astral rays?

He just sighed in dejection. At this rate, it was difficult to tell just when he would manage to catch up to her. But then another thought filled his mind, drawing a laugh. There were tens of thousands of mages on Norland; how many of them could stand side by side with her?

Another day passed, making for eight consecutive days of rest at the Cracked Canyon. Richard finally gathered all the nobles, holding another meeting about the Bloodstained Highway project.

Someone brought up increasing the army size, causing the nobles to erupt into an argument once more. But this time, he finally raised both hands to quiet them down, "It seems like the army size is a sensitive topic, we have enough time to discuss it in the future. However, we have suffered massive losses at the Cracked Canyon; I've decided to return to Bluewater first. Once the reinforcements join us, we will continue the project."

The nobles were somewhat surprised, but nobody opposed his decision. Richard's eyes flitted across the map, resting on Bloodflag Valley and other key areas as a slight grin appeared at the corner of

his lips. If Salwyn wished to make a move, there would likely be troops lying in ambush.

The Golden Warflag wasn't just in charge of resupplying the army; they were also gathering information on the neighbouring countries at his behest. Although the royal family of the Iron Triangle Empire did not seem to care about the ruckus he was making, Prince Salwyn had started gathering his army at the east of the empire. Soldiers were also grouping up in the south, basically screaming out Salwyn's target.

Despite remaining at the Cracked Canyon for eight whole days, he had not discovered Salwyn's location. This was very unusual; the later the prince appeared, the more fierce his attacks would be. Richard did not believe an opponent who had nearly forced him to his end would let go of such an obvious chance. Salwyn was likely preparing a trap somewhere, waiting for him to get caught.

It seemed like the merchants' information network wasn't viable, and there were restrictions on just how far the bats could scout as well. He currently had no clue of where Salwyn's main forces would attack him. Since he couldn't find the enemy, however, he would abandon his initial plans. A return to Bluewater would definitely be out of Salwyn's expectations. Since the enemy couldn't be found and wasn't making a move, then he would be the one to do so.

Such was his final decision. After arranging for appropriate defences, the army set off on the return journey. With the enemies in the middle all cleared out, a journey of a hundred kilometres only took two days.

Richard prepared to await the Direwolf Duke's arrival, finishing the sacrificial ceremony. This way, the Duke would be tied to his own chariot in this charge.

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Bloodflag Valley. Sir Aer, the Iron Wall, had waited seven whole



days but he did not see Richard's army at all. His infantry had packed lightly to make it to the valley on time; in fact, he had even given up some rations for more equipment. The day before he arrived, news of Richard's resounding victory at the Cracked Canyon spread throughout the Bloodstained Lands. The army had then started reorganising, so based on his predictions Richard should have arrived in three days. Aer had even pulled away his scouts in order to prevent Richard from discovering him.

However, he had waited seven whole days! This was far beyond the time taken for even a large army to rest, and Bloodflag Valley was only fifty kilometres from the Cracked Canyon. The army should have been there by now.

While Aer was waiting anxiously, Sawlyn was the same. News of Richard's charge into the Cracked Canyon had surprised him; what was there besides water and a small plot of arable land? Outside of the mushrooms in the underground caves, the only presence in the entire canyon was the stench of the orcs. Richard had actually gone to war with tens of thousands of orcs for this useless land? Had he gone senile?

The Cracked Canyon had always belonged to the orcs. Although there were many powerful human organisations in the Bloodstained Lands, nobody had focused their attention here for one simple reason: the losses far outweighed any potential profits!

Every adult orc was a powerful warrior. With tens of thousands of them... Even with his army, this was a tough bone Salwyn was unwilling to chew. Richard seemed to be intelligent and decisive, considering all factors before going to war. The frontier knight planned far ahead and never did anything he was unsure of. Even more terrifyingly, he had yet to lose a single battle!

No matter how difficult it was to understand, Richard truly had battled the orcs at the Cracked Canyon and won. However, his losses were immense enough to force him to remain near the canyon for seven days!

Hidden a hundred kilometres away in a border city of the Iron Triangle Empire, Salwyn was put in an impossible situation. Richard's camps were spread out wide in a complicated terrain. Although this was a disadvantage in battle, it made it easy for a bulk of the army to flee. The canyon was not an ideal place for the final battle. He had intended to attack them when they were a hundred kilometres in, striking like lightning and ending Richard at once. Who could have expected that he would actually stop to rest?

A few days later, the new information reached the hands of Salwyn and Sir Aer at about the same time. Salwyn felt speechless and dizzy at what he had heard; Richard had actually withdrawn his troops!

While the first reaction was disbelief, Salwyn immediately asked for General Hinton to withdraw. While the man could also lead battles, he was already at a numeric disadvantage; Salwyn did not believe he would be able to win against Richard.

When Hinton received the order via messenger hawk, he hastily withdrew from the Flintstone Forest. These movements were naturally discovered by Richard; it was impossible to hide the movements of thousands of soldiers. However, Hinton's army marched extremely quickly; Richard could not catch up, or he would have ended them immediately.

Thankfully, this verified Richard's suspicions. Salwyn truly was watching the situation in the Bloodstained Lands, waiting to pounce. Next would be a battle of wits and patience.

And patience was a virtue Richard had in abundance for now. With the broodmother around, his power would grow every minute and second. Since he was not completely sure of victory yet, he was willing to play this game of cat and mouse. The Prince hadn't achieved anything of note ever since his defeat at Sinclair's hands.

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The night he returned to Bluewater, Richard brewed a pot of tea and spent some time lazing around on the balcony alone. He stroked his teacup as he stared at the round moon in the sky, thinking to himself, ‘Salwyn’s definitely more anxious than I am.’

When the prince couldn’t wait any longer, Richard wouldn’t mind surprising him in the same way Odom had been.

Just as Richard was pondering over the next course of action, he saw a group of people entering his courtyard, five or six of whom were in clerical attire. A servant soon walked up to him, saying that clerics for the Goddess of Spring Water and the Goddess of the Forest wanted to see him.

Richard was slightly stunned. Two viscounts from from the Sequoia Kingdom had indeed sent clerics to his army, but they were only level 5 or 6. That was only level with Caesar; strictly speaking, they were only acolytes. Their spells hadn’t left any deep impressions either, his only memory of their existence being that there were quite a few. Since those of the clergy rarely participated in battles between nobles, he had noted the names of the gods they worshipped. However, on the battlefield even a dozen weak clerics like that couldn’t compare to a single one of Flowsand, Io, or Kellac. They weren’t worthy of further attention.

Whatever it was, they still represented two churches. These clerics could not be ignored, even if the Goddess of Spring Water and the Goddess of the Forest were known to many as trash deities. Richard instructed the servant to lead them to the meeting hall, entering himself after a short while.

When he walked into the hall, the six clerics were already seated. To Richard’s surprise, one of them was the highest level he had seen so far in the Bloodstained Lands. She seemed about thirty years of age, holding a refined charm that made her seem younger than she was. On top of that, she was actually a level 10 cleric— no,

at that level she could barely be considered a priestess.

Richard immediately walked over to her, greeting her with proper noble etiquette, “I have never seen you before, esteemed priestess. May I know which deity you serve?”

The priestess stood up, “Lord Richard, my name is Faylen. I serve the almighty Goddess of Spring Water, and am currently in charge of the church in the Sequoia Kingdom. I only reached Bluewater today.”

Richard’s smile immediately grew more sincere, “I welcome you! The clerics of your church played a very important role in the recent battles. Thanks to them, my men suffered far fewer casualties! May I know who accompanies you?”

Next to Faylen were a man and woman, both around the same level as her. They were also people he had never seen before. The two had different auras from the priestess at the front, so they were likely not worshippers of the Goddess of Spring Water.

## Book 3, Chapter 95 - Three Goddesses(2)

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Commoners had no way to differentiate the attributes of the servants of different gods; even someone like the Direwolf Duke could only roughly guess what camp they belonged to. However, Richard had seen the Book of Gods before, memorising the characteristics of the deities of Faelor. He was only asking here as a formality; he already knew who the other two were.

Faylen gracefully extended her hand to the other two, making the introductions, “This is priest Fermi, in charge of the Church of the Forest Goddess in the Sequoia Kingdom. This is priestess Shaw, serving the Goddess of the Hunt. He is the same.”

After she was done, Richard expressed his gratitude with impeccable manners. He also extended another welcome to the three priests, with a complicated set of pleasantries. This was a necessary thing when dealing with the clergies of Faelor, and only got worse with the weaker deities.

A sense of curiosity beset Richard; three priests had gathered at bluewater, but the purpose of their visit was unknown. They were all only level 10, but they could all manage churches. And these weren't any churches either; they were the only churches for those goddesses in the Sequoia Kingdom. Neian was only an intermediate god himself, but even a church in a border country was manned by a level 12 priest. Essien's genius had left even Richard shocked. Kellac had estimated that these three goddesses had trouble even maintaining their current positions. They were the three weakest deities of Faelor's pantheon.

Whatever be the case, this was the first positive contact between Richard and the deities of Faelor; this meeting was of great significance. Needless to say, the robbery of the Church of Valour and the killing of a priest of Ceres weren't exactly “interactions.”

Faylen spent some time explaining the purpose of their visit. The

clerics of the Goddess of Spring Water and the Goddess of the Forest had realised Io and Flowsand used powers unknown to them so far; these powers didn't seem to have any strong alignment either. Such powerful priests definitely required the backing of a similarly powerful deity; for a new god to possess such immense power was virtually impossible.

The clerics had immediately reported their findings through their own secret channels. However, what they didn't know was that Richard had already intercepted the contents of these messages. He had only let them go through because the messages would not disrupt his plans. It wasn't long after that the three goddesses had sent priests to visit him.

The biggest reason for the three rushing over was the fact that this unknown deity seemed to have a neutral alignment. The three goddesses were the same; it was rare for two neutral deities to have any fundamental conflicts.

And thus, Faylen suggested an alliance. Their churches would support his expansion wholeheartedly, but in return he would have to allow them to preach in his lands. Naturally, they would only send missionaries; his citizens would still be free to choose their faith.

Richard was quite surprised by the proposal. Although it seemed innocent enough to the untrained, he clearly understood what this meant from a theological perspective. His expression turned strange, "Are the three goddesses interested in forming a pantheon for neutral deities?"

Did these goddesses want to try and suppress the Eternal Dragon? Or did they just want an alliance of equal status? Whichever it was, Richard instinctively felt it to be ridiculous.

Norland was not like Faelor. Every deity outside of the Eternal Dragon walked a tough path, constantly eyed by legendary powerhouses who wished to kill them and take their power. This

was especially so for those beings who had left Norland long ago to explore the myriad planes. Almost every such powerhouse caused a stir upon their return to Norland. Some wanted a peek into the realm of divinity, others conspired to take their place, and even more tried to turn them into divine artefacts.

Thus, knowledge about the gods was spread far and wide through the entire plane. Places of learning like the Deepblue even had complete guidebooks about the gods. Of course, that was only a path to aspire to; whether one could actually walk it or not was a completely different story. Still, the pantheon of Norland had no secrets. Any mystery was reserved for the Eternal Dragon.

Richard's question immediately warped Faylen's face, "Had I not known you were a mage, I would have mistaken you for an avatar of a— Wait, could it be..."

Faylen and her companions stood up, evidently having remembered that divine avatars could still be mages. The fact that Richard could talk so freely about the mysteries of the gods was proof enough that he was unordinary. These were secrets known only to the top brass of their churches, while elsewhere one needed to be level 15 at minimum to even skim through. Even Faylen herself only knew what she did because of her mission.

Their reactions indicated the difference in theological teachings between Faelor and Norland. No wonder Faylen had spoken so candidly, she likely didn't understand the meaning of what was going on at all. He quickly waved his hands, "Don't get me wrong, I am only a mage. My teacher is only a mage as well."

Still bewildered, Faylen slowly sat down and continued, "So what do you say of our earlier proposal?"

Richard thought about it for a moment, "Please wait a minute, I will call my priestess. This is something we need to discuss in her presence."

The three priests agreed. The reason they had come to Richard

first was not for his strength or commandeering; they had mistaken him for a champion of a god. That was a status far beyond a mere priestess.

Flowsand soon arrived at the hall. She had a certain airiness about her, waves of divine power constantly radiating from her body. Faylen and company were filled with admiration; although they could tell that her level wasn't far off from theirs, her aura was in an entirely different league. She was likely a chosen; the reports from their clerics indicated that her spellcasting was more formidable than that of all three of them combined.

While Faylen and company felt rather uneasy about their earlier suggestion of an equal alliance, Flowsand didn't seem to mind at all. She didn't protest the agreement in the slightest, nor did she add any other conditions. This left all three priests very excited.

"Respected Priestess Flowsand," Faylen asked solemnly, "May I be so bold as to ask how we should address the great deity you worship?"

The name of a true god was of paramount importance. Richard hadn't given the three priests the name of the Eternal Dragon; it was far too formidable for Faelor's pantheon. Flowsand nodded herself before casting a glance at Richard, countless messages exchanged through eyes alone. She then leaned against a wall, "I cannot divulge the name of my god. However, there is a dragon seated in front of him who usually acts on his behalf. We just call it the old dragon."

The priests looked at each other in shock, stunned to silence. If even the god's name could not be revealed, this was a secret sect. Such gods were normally incomparably powerful or possessed special abilities.

An old dragon? A dragon capable of receiving faith on behalf of a god had to have some level of divinity itself. A divine dragon was only a servant of the actual god they worshipped? How powerful



could this deity be? Was this really a new god, so powerful the moment they ascended?

Indeed, an extremely powerful god would explain the might of Flowsand, Io, and the rest.

Having considered everything, Faylen stood up and said respectfully, “Honorable Lady Flowsand, I am very happy to work with the great... err... old dragon, yes. I swear on my faith; from today, the Church of Spring Water will be a close ally of you and Sir Richard!” Given her normal eloquence, Faylen had a hard time saying the words ‘old dragon.’ It was so awkward she had ended up stammering.

Afterwards, Fermi and Shaw expressed the same sentiments. For now, it seemed like the three goddesses had established an alliance with the Eternal Dragon.

The three priests were clearly delighted. After all, their deities were in jeopardy right now and there was no easy way to amass new worshippers. However, the first ten days of the Bloodstained Highway project had made Richard famous. Many people saw him as a future Rislant of the Sequoia Kingdom. It was a great thing to form connections with a figure that could be so important in the future.

Looking at their happy faces, Richard could only sigh in silence. If they knew the truth about the so-called ‘old dragon,’ would they still be so happy?

The Eternal Dragon did not suppress other deities because he had no need to do so. He relied little on the faith of his followers, while his teachings were far looser than with most other deities. However, he ruled over many planes. Allying with him put these three goddesses on the same level as planar invaders. With the strict rules of Faelor, being found out would spell disaster.

Given the power of these goddesses, even if they formed a deep alliance as allies it would be impossible for them to learn much

about the Eternal Dragon. Their laws were clearly not on the same level.

## Book 3, Chapter 96 - Surprise Attack

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For the three churches to have rushed over without trying to figure out the nature and origin of the Eternal Dragon, they were clearly in dire straits. Beggars could not be choosers.

Still, this was help that basically fell from the sky; Richard welcomed it with open arms. Although the clerics they could send over weren't too powerful at support, they could still cast lesser healing spells.

The Direwolf Duke was his first wedge into this plane, and these goddesses could be counted as the second. Those like Rolf and Kellac who were now bound to the dragon or others like Devon who were in strong alliances with him were the third, a category that was now bolstered by all the nobles participating in the Bloodstained Highway project. As long as he didn't make any big mistakes, Richard was sure few powers in Faelor were capable of driving him out.

Richard thus watched on with a smile as Faylen and Flowsand talked. In his eyes, these three priests were growing cuter and cuter; in order to promote the alliance, they had even brought a batch of precious materials as well as dozens of clerics and hundreds of paladins. At his request, the three priests even agreed to hand over complete command of their troops.

All they had obtained in return for such a large price was a non-exclusive right to preach on Richard's lands. Richard's gains far overwhelmed any potential costs.

However, as someone who came from Norland he did not understand that faith was the foundation of everything in Faelor. In the hundreds of millennia since the plane had been born, the various gods had fought without rest. Even gods of the same faction sabotaged each other. As time crawled on slowly, countless new gods had risen up even as hordes of old gods fell. Thus,

cultivating faith was the most important goal of the three churches.

Richard had originally been seated peacefully, listening to the priests chatting, but his expression suddenly changed. He stood up with an ashen face, causing the priests to look at him in surprise.

He took a deep breath, suppressing his agitation as best as he could to try and maintain a calm tone, “Distinguished priests, I am overjoyed that we have reached an agreement on the alliance. Unfortunately, I am afraid the time when I call upon your strengths has come much earlier than I expected. Enemies have already appeared outside the city; war is upon us. The battle will begin in half an hour at most!”

“What?!” Faylen was shocked, “Enemies? Who?”

“The Iron Triangle Empire. Esteemed priests, if you are willing to stand by me from this day forth, then hand me your clerics and paladins; give me full control. There is still some time to leave if you are unwilling to participate in this battle, but there isn’t much.”

Faylen’s face immediately shifted through a myriad of expressions. She hesitated for a moment, but eventually she clenched her teeth, “Alright! We will join the battle, you have our men!”

Her decisiveness surprised Richard a little, but he immediately smiled, “You have my gratitude. I guarantee you will not regret this decision!”

Having said that, he quickly left the meeting room. Flowsand led the three priests towards the barracks, beginning to organise all the new clerics. The priests themselves were acceptable at best, and their clerics were far too weak. They could only be put to some use if they were grouped properly. Flowsand and Richard knew each other well; when she saw him lose his calm so obviously, she knew this would be a tough battle.

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Richard had already started issuing telepathic commands even while asking the priests if they would join the battle. The atmosphere in the camp was boiling by the time he left his residence, soldiers quickly donning armour as they constantly streamed out of their tents and assembled on the field.

The soldiers had all been resting, but they had been given a sudden command to prepare for war in five minutes. That wasn't even enough time for a knight to wear his armour! Still, Richard's authority had been drilled into them; regardless of whether they would be able to make it these soldiers started moving the moment they got the order. The entire camp was thrown into chaos in an instant, the knights looking for their squires while the squires were searching for the horses.

However, some teams had formed a neat formation on the field within a mere two minutes. These were Richard's humanoid warriors, their reaction speed unparalleled.

Olar rushed over to him the moment he stepped out of the courtyard, shouting from afar, "What is it, my Lord? Who's coming, and how many?"

Richard's expression grew ugly. "The Iron Triangle Empire! They're less than ten kilometres away, with at least 30,000 men! Inform Rolf and the others right away, mobilise every soldier you can! No matter what, we need to stop them outside the city!"

"30,000!" Olar was shocked. He didn't dare disobey, immediately spurring his horse on and charging into the depths of the city. It was only a few minutes before the city-wide alarm rang out, the rhythmless mourn of the bells spreading throughout Bluewater!

A moment later, the entire oasis city had erupted. By this time, one could already see red smoke on the horizon. The earth had begun rumbling lightly as countless ironclad knights charged out of the cloud of smoke, rushing towards the oasis. Behind this grey

current was a seemingly endless formation of infantry.

It was only then that this large army started raising its banners one by one. If one understood the hierarchy of the Iron Triangle Army, they could tell that this was two legions of knights alongside two entire divisions of infantry!

A few huge bats flew out from Bluewater, circling above the encroaching army; they occasionally clashed with the bald eagles native to the Bloodstained Lands.

Tens of thousands of footsoldiers marched forward at an unbelievable speed, accompanied by elite knights that escorted a few luxurious carriages. This was Salwyn's command carriage; the Prince was currently atop the carriage roof, observing Bluewater Oasis through a pair of binoculars. He watched as his army rushed towards Bluewater like a group of wolves and tigers, unable to hide his confident smile.

He handed the binoculars to a beautiful assistant, "The enemy is already a mess. It seems like they did not anticipate my arrival at all."

There were more than ten generals on either side of the carriage, one of whom immediately showered Salwyn with compliments, "Your Highness deploys troops like a god! This time, you will definitely capture that Richard fellow!"

Salwyn suddenly shook his head, "It might not be that easy. Don't get too careless."

The group of generals all disagreed, feeling like he was being overly cautious. This was a rare sight from the prince.

For the sake of this sudden decision to strike at Bluewater directly, the army had travelled day and night. They wiped out anyone who could leak information along the way, appearing right outside the oasis within a mere two days!

Although the soldiers were already exhausted, Bluewater was a

place where many powers gathered. There was originally no city wall, with the current one only set up temporarily after the catastrophe that was Sinclair swept through the Bloodstained Lands. 30,000 elites were facing off against ten thousand men that Richard had cobbled together from various places; if they still couldn't win, these generals felt like they might as well go commit suicide.

Salwyn truly had been unpredictable. Richard had not expected him to refuse the wait, actually rushing hundreds of kilometres to catch him unprepared!

Outside of lunatics like Sinclair, few would attack political minefields like Bluewater. However, this advantage now posed a hidden danger; although most of the forces in the city were already allied to Richard, he was left with no choice but to guard against those who would take advantage of his predicament.

The Goddess of Luck still favoured Richard; if not for a bat discovering Salwyn's army on its patrol, he might only have discovered the attack once the enemy was at his gates. The retreat from Flintstone Forest had only been a diversion created to fool him!

One of Salwyn's generals suddenly pointed up at the sky, "Your Highness, those things are actually bats! How could there be bats flying around in the day?"

Salwyn looked at the sky through his binoculars for a moment, "Indeed! Those aren't ordinary bats, most likely a mage's familiars. However, this number... No matter, knock them down for me! The death of one's familiars will deal a heavy blow to the mage."

Two of the generals took off the huge bows that hung on their horses, bursting forth with saint-level energy as they sent sharp arrows flying into the sky! The bats fell down one after the other, only the largest of the lot reacting quickly enough to fly up and

avoid certain death. That bat continued to climb higher, eventually reaching a kilometre up in the sky. Not even a tracking arrow could threaten it anymore, but in exchange it didn't have too clear a view of the battlefield either.

Some guards collected the fallen bodies and delivered them to Salwyn. The prince checked them repeatedly, but he could not discover anything.

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Bluewater City was completely chaotic. Countless people were running around everywhere, the roads filled with carriages. People were constantly receiving the news and trying to escape from the oasis city. Although there would be nothing to protect them in the Bloodstained Lands, the vast and complicated terrain was a defence unto itself. Once they escaped, even an army that was 100,000 strong would not be able to find them.



## Book 3, Chapter 97 - Breaking An Army

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While many merchants were trying their best to get out of Bluewater, Richard was standing in front of the city gates with a stern look on his face. The cavalry gathering outside was slowly growing in size; at least 10,000 soldiers were now making their way forward. The vanguard of 8,000 soldiers were divided into 2,000 per group, starting to flank around the city.

Once they were only a few kilometres from the city, the enemy soldiers slowed down to regain their strength. They were preparing for the big battle which was about to come.

The nobles around Richard had ashen looks on their faces, some even shaking uncontrollably. The imperial army displayed a flawless battle formation; they were evidently giving their all even for the oasis.

Richard suddenly smiled, stroking his short, stiff moustache as he glanced around the surroundings, “Do you remember the wall of steel in the Cracked Canyon?”

Everyone was immediately stunned into silence. They suddenly remembered the brutal campaign, that legendary war where Richard displayed his fierce control of battle and awe-inspiring spellcasting. The mere mention boosted their morale.

He took in all their reactions and smiled calmly, “These people from the Iron Triangle Empire will feel the might of that wall, but first... Let me teach them a lesson. GANGDOR!”

“Ready, boss! My axe is thirsty for blood!” Gangdor’s clear voice rang out everywhere, his fist loudly smacking against his axe.

It was only then that the nobles realised a few hundred warriors had gathered at the city gate. Amongst them were a hundred Golden Eagles, two hundred throwers, and two hundred humanoid warriors. They were all confused. What were these 500 soldiers

trying to do, did they want to leave the city?

Richard didn't wait, retrieving the nameless sword and Extinction from his followers and crossing them behind his back. The Twin of Destiny in his hand, he took big steps towards the front of the city and hopped on his horse.

“Open the gates!” he cried out.

The nobles looked at each other in dismay. Was Richard really leaving the city? With only 500 warriors, a few followers, and two saints? Even though they had seen Richard perform several miracles, they still could not believe their eyes.

Zim's reaction was different. Although he had virtually no knowledge of military affairs, he felt his blood boiling. He snatched an axe from a warrior beside him, “Wait, I'm coming along!” He then rushed forward, ignoring the protests of his guards. However, in his moment of eagerness the Viscount could not locate his horse right away. A smart attendant had seen the developments and quickly taken it away.

Looking at him huffing and puffing as he walked in circles, Richard couldn't help but laugh. He raised his hand and pointed at the Viscount, “Halt!”

Zim was immediately rooted to his spot, awaiting the next orders. However, he would never have imagined that Richard would completely ignore him while the gate slowly opened. Face screaming murder, the runemaster waved the Twin of Destiny and cried out, “CHARGE!”

The Golden Eagles gently spurred their horses forward, all 500 soldiers leaving the city one after the other in a charge towards ten times their numbers.

The general on the other end was initially stunned, but that was followed by a humiliated rage. This was an obvious provocation that trampled on the dignity of the imperial cavalrymen. He didn't

speak a word, resolutely drawing his sabre and waving it twice at the pathetic army that seemed like it could be destroyed easily. Two battalions of a thousand soldiers each charged out from the flanks, picking up speed as they converged towards Richard like a powerful current!

However, just before this current of steel was about to hit Richard's small army a dazzling splendour lit up from amongst Richard's troops. The first few rows of soldiers and cavalrymen were blinded by the light of a divine spell.

The general squinted his eyes, stunned by the dazzling display. How many clerics could they possibly have to cast such an awe-inspiring spell? This spell was so powerful that each of Richard's soldiers basically gained two levels in an instant. Even though he had participated in countless wars, he had never seen such a powerful spell!

Atop the city walls, Faylen, Fermi, and Shea were all left stunned by the display. Their mouths were gaping wide open; every wave of the arms from Flowsand and Io showered a barrage of divine rays onto Richard's men. It seemed like there was no end to their power; be it strength or range, these priests were left in the dust. Only Kellac seemed somewhat normal, but even that was compared to Flowsand. He still exceeded Faylen and the rest.

Just as it seemed like the two cavalries were about to crash into Richard's troops, the heavy infantry that was guarding the perimeter tightly suddenly spread out. Richard's soldiers revealed their fragile ribs to the enemy!

The general realised something was wrong, but it was too late to change orders. A strange whistle rang through the sky, filling everyone's ears in an instant as they drowned out the thunder of the horses' hooves.

Grey blades flew out from the gaps in the formation, crashing into the charging cavalrymen. The frontlines of the incoming

cavalries immediately collapsed, not one man left standing! The once-orderly charge was left with a glaring gap.

The cavalrymen at the back could not believe their eyes, subconsciously reining in their horses. The mounts immediately let out long neighs, raising their hooves. Those who were in the back were still moving at full speed, but in order to avoid collision they were forced to change direction. The formations were immediately messed up; although they didn't descend into complete chaos, many still bumped into each other.

Two more volleys of poisonous axes flew out in quick successions, forming two grey clouds that were almost connected. The axes were distributed well, covering a large area uniformly. This also meant every inch of this cloud spelt death.

Only 700 cavalrymen were left on each flank after the three volleys. This swift destruction had shocked the incoming cavalries who were the pride of the Iron Triangle Empire, morale immediately crashing down. Faced with the strange formation and the attacks of the 200 throwers, the remaining cavalrymen strayed from their intended formation and charged towards the Golden Eagles instead.

The cavalry on the left wing knocked hard into the heavy shields of the humanoid warriors, but with how heavily buffed the infantry was they only managed to push the frontlines back by an inch. The first row of cavalrymen fell down from their horses into Richard's troops, meeting a gruesome end. These weren't heavy cavalrymen; they were not designed to fight an infantry that was armed to the teeth.

Both sides were immediately engaged in a melee, but the situation left the opposing captain dumbfounded. A hundred humanoid warriors swiftly broke ranks, ferociously ramming into the cavalrymen who had lost speed. They then swung their swords and beheaded their opponents, sending blood spraying everywhere! They immediately switched back to their shields and

charged the next set down, before drawing their shields and slashing down once again. Another row of cavalrymen cried out in defeat and perished.

The longswords used by these drones were shrouded in a magical glow. They were unmatched on the battlefield, cutting through armour like a hot knife through butter. Even the heaviest weapons the cavalrymen tried to block with were cut apart!

“Are they all enchanted?!” the general cried out. His eyesight was exceptional; he could tell that the swords of the humanoids weren’t ordinary, each one able to match his own sabre!

Each of the humanoid warriors was level 9, already possessing an overwhelming advantage against their level 5 enemies. That rift was only torn wider with all the buffs and equipment; in the end, the 200-strong heavy infantry completely slaughtered the enemy. The enchanted swords Richard had kept to himself ended up being used well.

Blood spurted and limbs flew as these blades met flesh, but this was only the beginning. The grand display was only getting started!

Richard started spinning his staff, surrounding his soldiers with walls of fire. These fierce blazes had once burnt the fearless orcs alive; it was definitely too much to bear for these mere cavalrymen.

A bird’s eye view would reveal that the walls formed a perfect circle that was just wide enough to cover Richard’s men. If the enemy soldiers wanted to get to his troops, they would have to suffer through the inferno. Even if they did manage that, however, waiting on the other side were the war machines that were the humanoid warriors.

Several soldiers decided to charge into Richard’s troops. Engaging in a melee with Richard’s troops was better than being burnt alive.

Two fireballs suddenly flew out from afar. The mages of the Iron Triangle Empire had finally had enough, beginning to act. One of the fireballs exploded in the midst of Richard's troops, but another was rebounded by Io to the midst of the imperial cavalry. The soldiers of the Iron Triangle Empire were lit up, but with all their buffs and barriers Richard's men had no trouble enduring the blast.

Richard roared and pointed the Twin of Destiny forward, causing a thick bolt of lightning to fall down from the sky onto one of the enemy mages. The other great mage was frightened, quickly retreating. He didn't dare to step close to the battlefield anymore; Richard's casting range was just too absurd.

## Book 3, Chapter 98 - Meat Grinder

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An imperial knight suddenly fell from the skies, crashing beside Richard's horse. He quickly got up with a flip, tossing his lance away before unsheathing a sword to strike at the belly of Richard's mount.

A stern glint shone in Richard's eyes. Extinction flashed and the knight suddenly covered his face, crying out as he collapsed. The sword in his hand had long since been broken into two; all Richard needed with Extinction in hand was to attack faster and more fiercely.

Having killed his enemy in one move, Richard suddenly looked up. Io seemed to be recovering between two divine spells, but he wasn't just staying idle. Ignoring the two elite humanoid guards that were following him closely, he took a few ingenious steps that somehow landed him in the bosom of an enemy cavalryman. His hand made its way to the man's neck, breaking it with a twist.

Having killed his enemy, the battle priest looked up and flashed Richard a stunning smile. However, his eyes were spewing flames. "How many are you planning to kill, great mage?" he asked in provocation.

Richard's eyes narrowed slightly, "At least a hundred!"

"With your skills?" Io chuckled before pointing at the throwers, "I can make it so only ten of those things die!"

"If you have such skill, it will be my loss!" Richard sneered.

The two brushed past each other, working hard at their own goals. Magic and divine power lit up the sky, practically stealing all the glamour of the world. They knew there wasn't much time left; if they didn't want this vanguard that was meant to establish their might getting trapped by enemy forces, they had to finish fast.

With such a disparity in level, equipment, magic, and the divine,

the imperial soldiers quickly fell into chaos. It wasn't that they lacked the courage, but Richard's attack was mind-numbingly vicious. These cavalymen saw their comrades fall in great numbers, but there was nothing they could do.

The instant they showed signs of crumbling, Richard immediately sent orders for everyone to withdraw. Walls of fire separated his soldiers from the imperial knights, giving the few hundred elites an opportunity to retreat. Even so, their formation was extremely tidy. The throwers threw out the last of their hatchets, left with nothing but their bare hands, but this final volley dropped the few dozen knights that were pursuing them onto the ground. The enemy cavalry ground to a halt.

The battle had been short yet intense. When Salwyn led his generals to the battlefield, Bluewater's gates had just closed.

The Prince looked ashen as he scanned the hundreds of dead knights in front of him without a word. The generals behind him were just as solemn, stunned into silence. The one in charge of the vanguard had knelt down, his head practically touching the ground as sweat beaded down his entire body. Richard's men had left corpses behind in this charge, but the number was pitiful. Less than fifty had died.

A ratio of over one to ten! Salwyn had been using a legion of trained soldiers instead of bandits, but the losses were only worse!

He suddenly turned and pointed to the general, roaring in fury, "I keep telling you not to underestimate the enemy! No matter how many soldiers Richard has, you have to go all out! And this is what you do? You had 4,000 men but only sent out half that? Have you woken up yet?"

All the generals listened to his raging words in silence, looking ashamed. The next moment, a general with a sturdy physique abruptly took a step forward. "Your Highness, allow us to charge into the city!" he said in a low voice, "They only have two saints



while we have five!”

Salwyn’s expression darkened, “Charge inside? Are you seeking death?”

“But—” the general still wanted to press on but was broken off by a wave of Salwyn’s hand. The Prince didn’t make another order, instead walking around the battlefield with a dark expression. He suddenly moved towards the general who was still kneeling, “Get up, go reorganise your troops. I give you one night, I hope to see your men ready to fight the next morning!”

“Yes, Your Highness!” the man shouted.

Salwyn then instructed the rest of the generals, “Clear the battlefield and set up camp. We will rest for now; the attack begins tomorrow morning!”

“Aren’t we besieging the city? What if they escape?” a general asked.

Salwyn turned towards Bluewater Oasis and answered darkly, “No. Richard is smart, he knows that I hope he will escape. That’s why he definitely won’t do so!” After a moment of silence, he slowly continued, “He wants to destroy me here. In that case, I’ll cross swords with him, head to head!”

“Your Highness, did you not say Richard’s commanding was very difficult to deal with? Perhaps it would be better to gather our saints and great mages and break through to his core directly,” another general proposed.

Salwyn stroked his well-trimmed beard and suddenly laughed, “You lot aren’t the normal saints who can only use your weapons, not your brains. Each and every one of you is a general capable of leading troops; your value as such is much higher than your individual strengths as saints. How could I let you take this risk?”

“Don’t worry about Richard. If we had equal numbers, I admit I would steer clear of him. If I had half a fold more men than him, I

would still reconsider declaring war. However, we have thirty thousand elites when he has less than ten. And even then, only a thousand are elites. This definitely isn't a war Richard wants!

“Richard can always defeat enemies at similar numbers, while I always ensure I outnumber my enemies. This is the difference between us,” he paused for a moment, “Since I can't win against him one to one, I will use two times the troops. If that doesn't work, I will use three times the troops! Do you not have faith in a three to one advantage? Why do I need to waste my outstanding generals?”

Salwyn ended with an extremely dignified statement, “Richard may be a great tactician, but I'm a great strategist!”

The morale of the generals was instantly reignited, going far beyond what they had even before Richard's attack.

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Seeing the army outside beginning to retreat and set up camp, Richard subconsciously frowned. Io took the moment to walk to the top of the walls and stand by his side, glancing outside the city, “This is quite the opponent! I'm afraid things will turn out badly for you this time.”

Richard flashed a faint smile, “How would you know without fighting? What, are you afraid?”

“If a person who couldn't even kill a hundred isn't afraid, what do I have to fear?” Io answered calmly.

Richard snorted in reply, “You didn't win either, did you? Far more than ten of my throwers died.”

In the short battle just now, Richard's spells had killed a little under eighty cavalymen. On the other hand, even though Io had gone all out almost twenty throwers were dead as well. Neither of the two had won the bet.

Io watched the imperial army hurriedly setting up camp and

smiled, “Don’t worry, we’ll still have time to make more bets. I’ll become level 14 in two days. I’m quite curious; how would a level 12 mage contend with a level 14 battle priest?”

“You aren’t level 14 yet, and I won’t always be level 12,” Richard retorted harshly.

“There’s still a long way to go, still many battles. Time will prove everything,” Io continued to smile.

Richard nodded, “Indeed, time will prove everything!”

The battle priest and great mage had nothing to say to each other anymore. They looked at the enemy troops outside, each with their own thoughts.

Salwyn hadn’t encircled the city at all, there was no need. Richard knew that the moment he left Bluewater, he would lose the terrain advantage. The imperial cavalry would be hot on his heels, bleeding out his army during the lengthy chase. The best outcome would be to escape with a few elites remaining, but that was not what he wanted! Once he lost his army, Salwyn could gather his powerhouses and try to eradicate his followers, ensuring that he died in the Bloodstained Lands.

Another method was to use the city to resist for a period of time, injuring as many of Salwyn’s men as he could before mounting a strategic retreat. At that point, the fatigued imperial army would probably have no strength to pursue further and would be left watching as he left.

However, Richard was thinking of a third plan; turning Bluewater into an enormous meat grinder! Bit by bit, he would erode Salwyn’s troops. This was an insane plan, but he calculated that the chances weren’t so low that he had to give up on it.

Richard had never considered escaping. Just like he had in the Bloodstained Lands, he was planning to give Salwyn a new ‘surprise.’ The wall of steel in the Cracked Canyon had built up

this army's trust in him.

The next morning, when the sun heated up the red soil of the Bloodstained Lands once more, the imperial army was already in neat formation outside Bluewater City. The low beat of war drums and ordered footsteps rang out as they surged towards the oasis city like a tsunami.

The meat grinder of Bluewater had begun.

The clash between tactician and strategist turned into a blaze that burnt the entire battlefield. Great fires charred the city all the way into the night, burning the nearby forest and turning the camps outside to ash. The wooden parts of the houses within the city had also been torched, dense smoke and lingering embers everywhere. While most of the houses were made of red stone that could not be burnt, the windows and roofs were all set ablaze.

## Book 3, Chapter 99 - A Fierce Battle

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The war raged from early in the morning to late in the night. Bluewater's fragile walls only managed to hold on for the morning before numerous sections were broken through, the Empire's infantry surging into the city. The moment the city was invaded, even Salwyn felt like the battle would end quickly. He had started looking at how to wipe out the enemy, deploying his knights to surround Richard. Killing the runemaster would be rather difficult, but just wiping out his army and killing his followers would be a huge victory as well.

However, the sounds of fighting did not stop. A battle that should have ended in a few hours stretched on infinitely. Only when day turned to night did Salwyn realise that the war had only just begun.

The sounds of battle were still ringing out everywhere inside the city even late into the night. Salwyn had been stood atop his carriage the entire day like a statue, not even drinking any water. He gazed grimly at Bluewater Oasis with its fires blazing everywhere, enraged at himself. The chaotic fight was already out of his control.

A few horses suddenly broke through the night, darting towards him. The one in the middle had a familiar body upon it.

The knight leading the group dismounted and knelt on one knee, shouting, "Your Highness, General Barry has died in battle! We expended much effort to get his body back!"

"Barry?" Salwyn's expression changed and he jumped off the carriage. The knights carefully lifted the general's corpse from the back of the horse, placing it in front of him.

Barry wasn't young, but even approaching fifty years of age he had a body as strong as steel. He was someone Salwyn heavily relied on, one of his two army chiefs. The man's upright and

meticulous nature allowed him to command an army from the frontlines, using his power as a saint to cut through enemy ranks with ease.

He had personally taken charge of a group of elites when the invasion began, fighting throughout the day until now, where his corpse was all that made it back. Laid on his back, Barry's eyes were still wide open in anger; his final roar was still frozen on his face. Numerous arrows were stuck into him, penetrating so deep through his armour that their feathers could not be seen.

Salwyn undid Barry's chest-plate and saw a sharp cut at his heart. However, looking at the traces of blood around the wound the man was already on the brink of death when he suffered this blow. The enemy evidently had no need to add this blow. Of course, Salwyn had no idea how important this blow was to Phaser.

Salwyn's eye twitched and he stood up, gazing at the blazing city in the distance. He suddenly saw a group of imperial footsoldiers fleeing the city in panic, a group of armed warriors right on their heels. Were those men really soldiers? The pursuers' clothes were tattered, and there seemed to be no formation to them at all. All they had was numbers and ferocity, a combination of thugs, bandits, and slaves.

Seeing the tired footsteps of his men, Salwyn finally remembered that they had been fighting an entire day. The brutal reality convinced him to give up on his thoughts of winning in one shot; he turned to the knight by his side, "Send the order, we're retreating!"

A moment later, a magic flare exploded in the night sky while a mournful horn resounded through the battlefield. The imperial army finally withdrew from the city, but seeing his warriors bathed in blood Salwyn could not recognise them at all. However, no matter how difficult it was to believe these were men he had trained himself. While it hadn't been long since he recruited them,

they still had considerable power. And yet, their numbers when withdrawing were greatly cut down from when they had entered the city.

“Your Highness—” A knight darted over, right about to say something, but was impatiently cut off by Salwyn, “Heal the wounded, make an inventory of the spoils and put up a proper guard. Do I need to repeat?”

Salwyn obviously wasn't in the best of moods, but the knight still pressed on, “Master Willis was injured within the city. The priest said he was actually poisoned, the only way to save him is to send him back to the Church immediately.”

“Master Willis was injured as well?!” Salwyn was shocked, his expression quickly darkening. Willin was a level 14 great mage, one of the six on this campaign. He had taken the risk to enter Bluewater, but now he was left with serious injuries!

Thinking back to Barry dying in battle as well, Salwyn suddenly felt a sense of discomfort. It was as though he had forgotten something.

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The sounds of slaughter had already calmed down in Bluewater. Some gutsy people were already walking around the streets, robbing the bodies of the imperial soldiers. More were putting fires, trying to save their homes.

In a small public square, Richard dragged his feet towards a small tavern, heaving hard to push open the doors. The hall was in complete chaos, dark bloodstains littering the floor; there had evidently been multiple battles here. The tables and chairs had long since been destroyed; Richard had to look forever to find a place that wasn't as soiled to sit in. He eventually just sat down with his back to the wall, panting hard. Extinction and the Twin of Destiny were tossed beside his feet, stained with blood and dirt. Legendary items did not deserve such treatment.

His heart was pounding fiercely, body feeling empty as a dried-out riverbed. He had basically no mana, body wracked by pain as a result of overusing his strength. The imperial army had taken an entire day to withdraw; Salwyn was far more determined than he had expected.

A few giant bats flew in through the window, hanging on the ceiling to rest. These elites had already exhausted their strength, leaving only one of their brethren still circling the city.

Heavy footsteps rang out outside the inn as Gangdor squeezed his huge body inside. He took a look around, brashly clearing out some space with his axe before burying it into the floor and sitting beside Richard. He was breathing hard as well, blood all over his body with a number of eye-catching injuries on his skin. His frightening armour was dented and broken all over, revealing many more wounds underneath. This day had truly been intense; if not for his armour, the brute would have been too gravely injured to even move.

The act of sitting down prodded at Gangdor's injuries, causing him to purse his lips at the pain. He produced a flask of wine and took a few swigs, before seeing it was almost empty and unwillingly passing it to Richard, "Drink a bit, boss! This stuff will give you energy!"

Richard took the flask and gulped down two large mouthfuls, belching out an alcoholic odour. He suddenly found himself feeling much better, but instead of returning the flask to Gangdor he undid his shirt to reveal a wound stretching from shoulder to chest that was a dozen or so centimetres long. Gritting his teeth, he poured the alcohol in the flask onto the wound. While his will was staunch, he still hissed at the pain.

"Boss, I'll find a priest! That needs healing!"

Richard tossed the flask back to Gangdor and hummed, "Your wounds are more numerous and more serious than mine."



Gangdor shook his head, “That’s different! My skin is thick, these little things are nothing. Some alcohol and a night’s rest and I’ll be fine. So many are still hurt, waiting for the clerics’ spells to save their lives. Although we have more clerics now, it’s still far from enough to save them all. Let’s not waste their divine force!”

“Right. Let’s not waste their divine force,” Richard repeated.

“No— Boss, that’s not the same!” Gangdor scratched his head, trying to refute him. In his mind, Richard was a lord; the status of a lord was more noble than that of commoners or soldiers. Gangdor himself was a mixed-blood, status even lower than commoners. On top of that, he had grown up in the Archeron death camps basically like a slave. However, Richard was different. A little injury on a noble was far more important than the life of a commoner; this was only common sense.

On top of all that, Richard wasn’t just a noble either. He was also a mage and runemaster, two identities that exceeded even his nobility. Richard’s actions left the brute confused; why would his lord treat his injuries like a common warrior?

Seeing that Gangdor still wanted to persuade him, Richard interrupted, “Enough! I know what to do. Come, remove your armour. Careful not to let it catch onto your wounds.”

Gangdor suddenly felt all the wounds on his body sting. He struggled to get up, clumsily starting to undo his armour. However, Richard picked up the Twin of Destiny and used the legendary staff as a crutch, moving over, “Let me help you.”

Gangdor wanted to reject him, but was stopped once again. The injuries on his arms also made it difficult for him to touch some of the buckles to loosen the armour. With Richard’s help, the heavy armour was finally removed.

As expected, many of the wounds had stuck to the armour; quite a few split open the moment it was removed. Richard himself ended up using too much strength, the injury on his chest splitting

open and streaming blood.

The two men huffed as they sat on the ground, splitting the last bit of wine in the flask before their ashen faces regained a bit of colour.

“Boss, how’s everyone else?” Gangdor asked after a while.

“They’re fine. They didn’t even get hurt.”

Gangdor was startled, “What? Not even that fatty Tiramisu?”

Richard sensed the ogre mage in his mind for a moment before answering with certainty, “Not even him!”

Gangdor looked down at his numerous injuries, and then at the slice on Richard’s chest. In that moment, he was rendered speechless. It took him a long while to grit his teeth and speak, “Those fellows are too bloody crafty!”

# Book 3, Chapter 100 - Battle In The Night

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Waterflower's cold, indifferent voice rang out from outside the door, "Crafty? I certainly didn't kill any fewer people than you did!"

Gangdor's face fell. He snorted loudly to posture that he wasn't scared of her in the slightest, but he was still sensible enough to not say anything else. Phaser followed in behind, while Olar, Zentrall, Tiramisu, and the others eventually gathered in the tavern as well. Richard and his followers could sense each other through their souls; they would naturally assemble together.

"Master, I've already made an inventory of the battlefield," Olar started the moment he stepped in, "We don't have an exact count yet, but we lost more than 2,000 men. Miss Flowsand is doing her best to rescue the wounded, she cannot come over for the time being."

Richard nodded, "Okay, go invite Shea here. Oh, and Zim too."

The elven bard accepted the order and left.

Gangdor hesitated for a moment, but eventually ended up speaking his mind, "Boss, we had to put in everything to fight them off today. Tomorrow's battle won't be easy! There's 30,000 men out there!"

"25,000 after today, but only 15,000 of those can actually enter the city," Richard replied calmly. With his elite bats in the sky, his understanding of the casualty count was extremely precise with a discrepancy of no more than a hundred men. Salwyn couldn't possibly send his cavalrymen into the alleys to fight.

Gangdor was even more worried now, "Doesn't that make our disadvantage even greater tomorrow?" A disadvantage of one to three had become even worse after this fight.

Richard's brows creased as he seemed to be stuck making a

difficult decision, “It’s not like there isn’t a solution to this, but... Let me think things over again.”

It was at this moment that Shea was brought to the tavern by a humanoid warrior. Her eyes lit up the moment she saw Richard and she smiled, “Sir Richard! May I know what it is you wished to see me about?”

The priestess’s gaze was focused on Richard’s upper torso, on the striking wound at his chest.

“I heard the spells of the Goddess of the Hunt allow hunters to conceal their movements in complicated terrain?”

Shea’s eyes lit up and she answered proudly, “Indeed, that is my Lady’s expertise!”

Richard nodded, “Very well! I’ll be heading out of the city in a while to mount a sneak attack on the enemies. Priestess Shea, would you like to come along?”

“Sneak attack?” Shea was greatly astonished, “Is your wound alright? Also... my mana...”

Richard smiled, taking a magic box from a humanoid to reveal a row of neatly arranged potions, “Mana will not be an issue.”

“High-grade mana potions, and so many!” Shea sucked in a breath of cold air.

Anything related to magic was extremely expensive in Faelor. Even as a priestess in charge of a church, she had never seen so many mana potions together before, let alone high-grade ones. Indeed, mana would not be a problem with these potions; the only problem was that she could only use one a day. If one was really looking for problems, the only other issue was the cost of a thousand gold per bottle; it made one feel like they were drinking gold.

Before Shea could even recover from her shock, Zim could be heard yelling excitedly outside the door, “Sir Richard, you truly are

a legend! Even killing a saint was so easy! How did you know General Barry would appear at that street corner?”

Zim’s gaze was so intense that even Richard felt a little resignation. “Sheer luck,” he shrugged it off.

“Impossible!” The Viscount shook his head resolutely, pointing at Waterflower, Phaser, and Gangdor, “I saw it all. Those three and the two saints were already waiting in ambush at the corner of the street! They finished the entire battle in one minute! You truly are a model commander!”

Richard did not respond, his expression instead turning cold, “Didn’t I have you hide yourself?”

“I want to kill enemies too!” Zim waved his hand around with force, his face flushing red, “I am a noble too, and a warrior!”

Richard decided to pretend like he didn’t hear the fat slob babbling nonsense, tossing potions out one after the other to those who needed it before twisting the lid off one himself and pouring the contents down his throat. He threw the empty bottle away, donning his shirt and placing Extinction on his back. He finally lifted the Twin of Destiny and then pointed to all of his followers, “Come, let’s give that Salwyn another surprise!”

The followers all started preparing for battle in silence. One follower after another was preparing for battle in silence. Gangdor stood up, lifting his crimson-stained axe and casually flexing his muscles. His wounds split open, but the fellow did not mind at all.

Although he was painfully neglected, blood rushed up to Zim’s head as he looked at this group who emanated an aura of blood and blazing steel. He took a big step forward and asked loudly, “What about me?”

“You?” Richard looked at Zim in all seriousness and thought for a moment before patting his shoulder, “You are to take a few men and return to your father immediately. Inform him that troops

from the Iron Triangle Empire are at the Bloodstained Lands, and have him think of a way to persuade Duke Grasberg to cut off Salwyn's retreat."

"But isn't that just escaping?" This was clearly not the answer Zim was looking for.

"Absolutely not!" Richard said solemnly, "This is extremely important. If you are confident in persuading the Duke to send his men, Salwyn will only dare to stay here for three days at best. He won't run the risk of having his retreat completely cut off. I believe the Duke won't let such an opportunity pass him by. You're extremely important. If you don't step forth personally, I'm afraid the Duke will never send his troops."

"I'm important?" the Viscount was rather doubtful.

Richard clapped his shoulder hard, speaking in a low voice, "Very!"

Richard then left the tavern, the group of followers that reeked of blood passing the Viscount in single file. Zim was a little distracted, but he could vaguely sense that these frightening people seemed to be less scornful of him.

In the blink of an eye, the only ones left in the tavern were his personal guards. A moment later, Zim turned to one of his men and asked, "Am I really very important?"

The guard was well-tested, answering without hesitation, "You have always been very important, my Lord!"

The flush of excitement in Zim's face gradually faded. He gazed in the direction Richard had left, suddenly remarking, "I've learnt just how important I am."

The guard was startled, able to sense that his master was somewhat out of sorts that night. "My Lord? You—"

Zim interrupted his words, "Go back to Father immediately, and have him send his troops over for support!"

“But...” Bewilderment was written all over the soldier’s face. However, Zim clapped the man hard on the shoulder, speaking in a low voice, “Go! You are very important!”

The Viscount then took the rest of his personal guard and left, leaving the man staring blankly at the tavern walls. He really wanted to remind the Viscount that quite a few men had already been sent to ask for help. Besides, a large sum of money had been spent to deliver a message through magic; the first batch of troops from the Earl had likely set off already. Duke Grasberg’s army would be on their way the next morning, while another batch would come from Countess Katrina. The Countess wasn’t just adept at politics; she could compare to a marchioness in terms of military capability.

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Five hundred cavalymen stealthily exited the city, taking cover in the gathering darkness. Every one of these men were drones; 350 humanoids and 150 throwers. The warhorses all walked at a calm pace, but there wasn’t a single sound from their hooves. This was the power of Hunter’s Domain, a supporting spell of the Goddess of the Hunt.

These soldiers didn’t head to Salwyn’s camp, instead running in the opposite direction towards a little forest where a similar number of cavalymen from the empire were camped to prevent any remnant forces from escaping. Each one of these imperial knights was a seasoned fighter with plentiful experience, but no matter how well they hid they could not escape the eyes and ears of the elite bats.

Just about a kilometre or so from the little forest, the army seemed to stop without Richard issuing any orders. Zendrall began a chant, a deathly aura enveloping the place as warriors of darkness walked out from a summoning portal one after the other.

Shea stared expressionlessly as the warriors exited the portal, but

her body had already started trembling. Richard suddenly leaned close to her and warned quietly, “Be a little careful during the battle, don’t cast healing spells on them.”

The priestess nodded her head reluctantly, but then she suddenly covered her mouth. “My Lady!” she exclaimed softly, “What is that?”

The deathly aura suddenly doubled in intensity as the skull of a horse popped through the portal. The enormous figure of a knight squeezed its way out of the summoning spell with some difficulty, extremely burly with a gigantic sword in hand. Although the sword was covered in rust, it most certainly had unimaginable power just looking at its size and weight. Besides, this warrior of darkness emanated an intense aura of death that made Shea want to run. Although a priest could naturally subdue the undead, they were rendered ineffective against those creatures who were far higher than them in level.

“Just a death knight, Zendrall’s little pet,” Richard replied lightly before pointing to the forest ahead, “Beautiful priestess, there are about 500 knights in the forest ahead. Do be careful while protecting yourself.”

Shea nodded, but her face was still pale. The lifeless atmosphere surrounding her was simply too overwhelming. Besides, a battle was about to begin; Richard’s followers were emanating a murderous aura so intense it was almost tangible. It caused her to subconsciously lean towards Richard himself; it was only beside him that she felt safe and warm.

Richard raised his left arm up high and motioned forward, sending his troops barrelling into the pitch-black forest ahead. It was only then that Shea noticed a little detail; from the very beginning, Richard hadn’t made a single sound while issuing orders. A few simple gestures at most, and these men followed his every command. It was fine for the formidable followers to be that discerning, but how did these regular warriors see his gestures in



the dark?

However, she had no time to think into it. The charging army swept her along into the forest.

## Book 3, Chapter 101 - Arming Soldiers

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A cry of surprise echoed in the dead of the night, quickly morphing into a scream of terror. More joined the first voice soon after, blending into a cacophony that resounded through the dark forest. A strong stench of blood enveloped the region, spread everywhere by the night breeze.

And yet, the cries were gone as quick as they came. Dozens of knights fled away from the other side of the forest, pushing their horses as best they could as they disappeared into the depths of the night.

A short while later, Richard was stood in the middle of the forest sweeping his eyes across the battlefield. The broodmother's drones were cleaning up the battlefield, carrying away the injured on their side and finishing off the enemies that weren't yet dead. The imperial cavalymen had been massacred; with the aid of powerful magic and divine spells, only a dozen or so humanoid had died to eliminate almost all of the enemies.

However, the victory did not bring any happiness to Richard's face. On the contrary, his expression only grew more gloomy. Such tenaciousness in battle, such power on the brink of death... These cavalymen had left a deep impression on his mind. It seemed like all of the troops Salwyn brought along were elites. Things did not seem optimistic.

He suddenly pulled Gangdor to the side, softly whispering some instructions to him. Gangdor thus gathered all of Richard's followers along with Shea, leaving the forest. Richard then sent down an order, causing the humanoids and throwers to put aside their work and pounce towards the dead horses. Silently, they shared a meal; the only sound breaking the quiet was the rustle of chewing.

The aura of the drones quickly grew powerful once more. As long

as these units had sufficient food, they would restore themselves just as quickly as a healing spell would. This scene naturally couldn't be shown to outsiders.

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By the time Richard returned to Bluewater, it was already past midnight. The fires blazing all over the city had been extinguished, the soldiers who had fought all day in a deep sleep. They needed the rest; tomorrow's battle would only be more horrifying. Unlike them, the residents and slaves of the city were busy mending the city wall.

Richard immediately gathered all his followers and the nobles upon his return, including important figures like the priests of the three goddesses. Once everyone was present, he said with a deep voice, "Even though we repelled the Iron Triangle Empire today, without any changes tomorrow's battle will be a certain loss!"

His words sent all the nobles into dismay, everyone turning a deathly pale. All of them had participated in the first excursion of the Bloodstained Highway project, so by now they had an almost blind faith in Richard. If he said their loss was certain, then it was.

"Do we have no choice but to flee?" one of them asked hesitantly. The city still had a large number of soldiers to resist the invaders with. Moreover, Salwyn had brought along a large cavalry. If they abandoned the city to flee, it would certainly be a tragedy. In all likelihood, only a small number of them would be able to escape back to the Sequoia Kingdom.

In a world where military might was revered, many nobles would choose honour over life. They would rather die on the battlefield than abandon their soldiers without even fighting.

Richard took in all the reactions and spoke up, "We actually have a way of reversing the numerical disadvantage."

"Impossible!" a noble shouted, "Salwyn brought 30,000 men, but

we don't have that number even if you add everyone in the city together!"

Richard glanced at him and said profoundly, "No, all added up there are 60,000 here."

"You're saying..." the man cried out, his eyes widening.

"Arm the slaves!" Richard said resolutely.

The nobles glanced at each other, hesitating. Armed slaves were something they hadn't even dared to think about. Every leader spent an enormous amount of time considering how to prevent slaves from rebelling. Richard wanted to arm the slaves in the middle of a war?

One of them finally laughed bitterly, "Sir Richard, I fear those slaves will point the weapons at us first."

"It's the only way," Richard replied, "Moreover, I'm still decently confident."

An aged noble had worry etched into his brows, "My Lord, you would be setting a dangerous precedent."

Richard's eyebrows locked together, but he still maintained his firm stance, "I've already decided. Olar!"

The bard stepped out in response.

"Go, gather my desert warriors and barbarian soldiers, along with all the able-bodied slaves. Bring them all to the central plaza."

Olar immediately hurried away to carry out his orders. In the meanwhile, Richard had Gangdor and Kellac prepare weapons and food.

An hour later, an entire 20,000 slaves were brought to the square. Their expressions were blank, seemingly unclear about the situation.

The slaves came from a mix of races, but most of them were the desert people aboriginal to the Bloodstained Lands. Richard's own

cavalry was left with only a thousand desert warriors after the battle, but they arranged themselves in an orderly formation and stood in front of him. Having been his subordinates for a long time, even the most brutish desert warriors had turned into disciplined elites.

Richard walked to the front of the desert warriors and barbarians, suddenly barking out a command, “Those of you who were originally slaves, raise your hand!”

The soldiers were very doubtful, but following his commands had already been ingrained into their very being. A sea of arms immediately shot up.

All the nobles behind Richard were shocked. They could never have expected that Richard’s intimidating soldiers were almost all once slaves!

Richard nodded in satisfaction before roaring once more, “Those who have already obtained your freedom, raise your hands!”

The sea of arms went up once more. Outside of a minority that had only recently joined him, these soldiers had followed Richard for a long time and accumulated enough merits to become full soldiers.

Richard then pointed at a corner of the plaza, towards a pile of swords, axes, and other weapons. “There lie the most fundamental tools to become a soldier— weapons!” His finger then moved towards the slaves gathered in the plaza, “And there are people of the same status as your former selves!”

The desert warriors and barbarians looked at the weapons and then at those who were still slaves. A thread of understanding began to rise within the army, excitement starting to show on their faces.

Richard suddenly raised his voice, “NOW GO! Go, take these weapons and give them to your compatriots. Go, tell them how to

become soldiers! As long as they can achieve what you have, they can become my soldiers!”

The plaza immediately went silent. However, one barbarian suddenly rushed out of the formation to the weapon pile. He picked up more than a dozen heavy battle-axes, walking towards the barbarians amongst the slaves. He went to each one, shoving an axe into their hand and whispering something into their ears. He finally patted their chests before moving onto the next.

A group of desert warriors soon sped out as well, taking the bundled weapons and charging towards their people. They shoved the swords into their hands, howling in their native tongue.

The plaza gradually grew chaotic as more and more slaves obtained weapons. The expressions of the nobles started to look very disturbed, only Richard seemingly maintaining his calm as he quietly watched the situation develop.

Eventually, most of the slaves had weapons in their hands. The atmosphere was starting to grow stifling.

An aged barbarian soldier suddenly rushed out of the formation once more, shouting at the barbarians in the group of slaves. The barbarians hesitated, but eventually they started walking to the right side of the plaza. More and more started to follow, until eventually every single one was gathered together in an expression of their willingness to fight for Richard.

The desert people went into an uproar as well, the slaves gradually joining the barbarians. It wasn't long before almost every slave in the plaza was on the right.

A smile finally crept up Richard's face. He turned around towards the nobles, “It seems like His Highness Salwyn will meet with a big surprise tomorrow!”

The nobles nodded one after the other, finally heaving a sigh of relief. Finally at ease, they realised they had all broken out into

cold sweat. Of course, they didn't know that under his robes Richard himself was drenched.

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When the sun rose the next day, the reorganised imperial army appeared outside Bluewater once more. It didn't take much effort for them to make their way back into the city. There was nothing much left to burn anymore, but magical flames still soared into the sky.

Stood on his carriage, Salwyn looked coldly at the imperial soldiers making their way into the city. However, this chaotic oasis was like a bottomless swamp; no matter how many soldiers were thrown in, they would all sink. Sounds of fighting echoed from dawn to noon, more and more injured soldiers being carried out from the city. However, there wasn't the slightest sign of Bluewater actually falling. Worse yet, the defenders didn't seem to have the slightest intention of fleeing.

The imperial soldiers were already spread all the way throughout Bluewater, fighting everywhere. In such a chaotic situation, the Prince had already lost all power to command them; he could only hope his soldiers had been trained well enough.

Within the chaotic city, a veteran of the imperial army was searching through the streets when he suddenly heard movements in a house beside him. He immediately kicked down the door and rushed in, but that was a decision he came to regret in the next instant. Inside was a noble dressed in foppish clothes, but guarding him were three others. Just by sight, one could tell these bodyguards were not to be trifled with.

"This guy is mine! You lot aren't allowed to interfere!" the young noble pulled out his sword, pointing it to the front. His left hand held his waist, adopting a fencing stance.

The veteran stared blankly for a moment, but then he flashed a hideous grin. He raised his sword that was still dripping with

blood, smiling in satisfaction as the plump young noble's face paled in an instant.

This was Viscount Zim. He hadn't left as per Richard's instructions, instead hiding himself within the city. His wish of fighting had finally been fulfilled, but at the sight of the ferocious soldier both of his legs went soft. He started wanting to look for a basement or attic to hide in like the previous day.



## Book 3, Chapter 102 - Persistence And Hope

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An incomparably miserable scream rang out not far from Zim, clearly a cry of death. The shout was the last push to the Viscount's frayed nerves; his legs completely gave way, unable to support his body as he crumpled to the ground. The personal guards immediately raised their spears to protect him, but the soldier opposite smirked and spit at the ground.

For some reason, the veteran's sneer seemed incomparably offensive in Zim's eyes. A scene from the previous night appeared before his eyes once more, one of a heavily wounded Richard walking past him as if nothing was wrong to attack the much-stronger imperial army in the night. The two images intertwined like fire, burning into his brain!

Zim's vision turned red. He let out a bestial roar, erupting with unknown strength as he pushed aside his guards and charged towards the soldier nearby. Schlick! The rapier that had once been a mere decoration shone like a rainbow, burying itself into the veteran's heart.

The man's body slowly fell to the floor, face frozen in a state of shock. Zim stared blankly at his opponent, not understanding what had happened for a moment. Only when his guards screamed out about an injury did he feel a scorching pain in his shoulder, looking down to find a ten-centimetre gash that was gushing blood.

Richard's image came to his mind again, an image of the open wound on the mage's chest. The fat youth swallowed down the miserable scream that was already in his throat, taking off his ripped shirt and throwing it on the floor. He exposed his entire upper body to the stunned guards, arrogantly sitting on a stool and shouting at them, "What are you lot panicking for? Come, wrap it up for me! The war isn't over yet!"

Zim suddenly felt like he had a bit of Richard's aura. It was just that the mage revealed blocks of sharp, defined muscles, while his own body was dazzlingly pale and delicate. He only had curves, no edges.

The guards quickly wrapped up the Viscount's wounds. Disregarding their dissuasion, Zim took his rapier and left the building for the streets. Since he had already begun, the fellow could not be stopped; by the time night fell, four men had fallen to his sword.

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In another corner of the city, Richard carried the Twin of Destiny in his left hand and Extinction in his right. A group of humanoid drones followed him as he ferociously passed through two alleys to block off the escape of hundreds of imperial footsoldiers.

Dozens of footsoldiers rushed him the moment he left the alley, but he didn't so much as speak a word. The tip of Extinction briefly touched the ground as he started moving faster and faster, eventually charging into the enemy head-on!

A group of only thirty humanoids were behind him. They did not know fear; regardless of whether the enemy numbered in the hundreds or the thousands, they would charge in without hesitation.

Even as Richard was running into the footsoldiers, hundreds of slaves suddenly emerged from another alley. They had no equipment outside of the swords in their hands, but they still charged up against the armed soldiers like madmen. They cared not for the difference in power between the two sides, mobbing the enemy as they tried to pierce the enemy with their blades. Howls resounded throughout the street.

Only a dozen of the footsoldiers eventually broke through the barricade, diving into another small alley as over a hundred slaves gave chase. In the meanwhile, those who managed to kill their

enemies cut off the ears of their targets and hung them on their waists as spoils of war.

Richard let out a long sigh, an indescribable exhaustion bubbling up from various parts of his body that made him want to just collapse and find someplace to get some sleep. His head felt like it was being torn apart; he had been commanding dozens of men at a time all this while, even tasking his second mind to the battle until he was almost completely spent. The entire city was a battlefield, with both sides mixing together everywhere. One did not know whether the next corner held an ally or an enemy.

And yet, despite the difficulty, his followers and soldiers were spreading and converging constantly. They were the hardest of teeth, constantly grinding away at the flesh and blood of the enemy.

His mana pool had already dried up, all scrolls used; even his stamina was exhausted. He moved into a broken-down house by the road and sat down against the wall, gasping for breath like a fish on land. The humanoid warriors had already formed up and left for the next battlefield.

A bird's eye view would show the humanoids gathering towards a small square where hundreds of imperial soldiers were guarding a great mage. The mage was constantly chanting spells and waving his beautiful staff around, shooting fireballs into the surrounding buildings one by one. The screams that sounded from time to time were proof enough of the terrifying power of his magic.

Four separate teams, more than a hundred humanoids in total, were charging towards the square from all sides. Behind a small two-storey building, more than twenty throwers had gathered. The throwers had a myriad of weapons in their hands, hatchets and bone blades long since exhausted.

Richard breathed a sigh of relief, continuing to recuperate. He did not need to look to know that the great mage was finished.

Phaser was hiding in a ruined building less than twenty metres away.

A rush of footsteps sounded outside the house and a person stuck their head in to take a look. He then cried in surprise and rushed into the room, looking at the Twin of Destiny in Richard's hands with pleasant surprise. This was a level 7 veteran, likely a low-ranking officer in Salwyn's army. He looked at Richard and flashed a sardonic smile, "So it's a mage! I'll get a lot of credit for killing you!"

Richard stood up without a sound, staff in his left hand and sword in the right. However, that only caused the soldier to heave a sigh of relief; the mage was clearly dried up. One could clearly tell that the youth was a rookie at close combat, he actually held a staff and sword at the same time! The veteran could easily fight a dozen mages without mana.

Richard suddenly snarled, taking a few quick steps before bringing Extinction down on the man's head. The soldier sneered, his blade firmly meeting Richard's head on. Extinction flew out upon contact, embedding itself into the roof.

The officer had overused his strength and couldn't stop himself from taking a large step forward. Richard stepped forward at the same time, brushing past him. A muffled sound rang out as the Twin of Destiny ruthlessly smashed into the back of the man's head, the incomparably delicate-looking fallen angel wing covered in blood and brain.

"Bah, a novice! So easy to deceive!" Pah! A rookie! So easy to deceive." Richard didn't even look at the man, hastily wiping the staff's head with his shirt to clean the gore off it.

"Sorry, pal!" he said apologetically. This was not the first time the legendary staff had been subject to this kind of treatment.

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When night finally fell, the imperial soldiers retreated from Bluewater like a tide. It was impossible to find an undamaged building in the entire city, smoke and fire everywhere. Looking on from afar, the Lighthouse of Time was now incredibly eye-catching. Not long ago, there had been many buildings of a similar size to this building that looked like a watchtower, but the storm of war had completely ruined Bluewater. The city walls were collapsed in multiple places, long since a mere decoration. It was reasonable to say that the city had no life anymore, but now it seemed like there were walls and fortresses everywhere. Behind every broken wall, in every abandoned house were an unknown number of enemies lying in wait.

Salwyn watched the oasis city from afar, his brows locked together as though they could never be separated. He had lost close to 4,000 soldiers once more, and amongst his six great mages two had died in battle. Battles in the streets would consign mages to their graves; he did not expect the remaining three would willingly enter the fray anymore.

Judging by the reports of each of his generals, Salwyn knew that Richard had lost over half his troops. His advantage should have grown large and larger, leaving the frontier knight unable to defend. And yet, he had pulled off the miracle. The number of enemies within Bluewater had only seemed to grow, making it impossible to kill them all.

Bluewater only had 20,000 residents in total. Adding on Richard's troops, that was still only 30,000. How could they resist for so long?

"Could it be..." A shadow flitted across Salwyn's face. He had thought of the slaves as well.

Still, that did not resolve all his doubts. Everyone knew how weak slave soldiers were. A thousand imperial soldiers could easily defeat ten times their number in slaves. Thus, slave soldiers were only used for transport and construction; even in the worst case,

they were only used as cannon fodder.

The only good news was that Richard's losses today were far worse than his own.

But what about tomorrow?

Salwyn suddenly wavered. He did not know if he could defeat Richard's troops the next day. There were many instances today where it clearly seemed like the enemy would collapse, but they had pulled out miracles to persist. He wanted to catch a few of Richard's soldiers and open up their heads, taking a look to see if they were homunculi that did not know life from death, puppets that did not understand fear.

Only such warriors could last this long, right?

A strand of unease quietly rose in Salwyn's heart. Time was a huge factor here; there were many nobles of the Sequoia Kingdom within the city, and most frightening of all was someone named Zim. An incompetent fat Viscount, but the youth was incredibly close to Duke Grasberg. He was almost sure reinforcements were on their way.

Back in the city, Richard's followers were gathered together once more, listening to Richard describe their tactics for the next day. In addition to his followers were the high-ranking nobles and the priests of the three goddesses. The room reeked of blood and sweat, and everyone looked battered and exhausted. Even the priests' beautiful robes were covered in dirt and bloodstains. Almost everyone was injured, clearly showing the hardships of the day's battle. However, there was no despair and fear to be seen in their eyes that were burning with valiance.

These eyes burned with persistence and hope.

## Book 3, Chapter 103 - Aftermath

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Richard looked up at everyone present, “We won’t be able to give Salwyn a surprise tomorrow...”

Just as everyone was baffled, however, he finished the sentence, “because he’s already used to us chasing him out!”

“Hehe...” “Yeah...” “Ha...” These unenthusiastic responses came from Richard’s followers. They were evidently not interested in his poor jokes.

Indeed, Salwyn wasn’t surprised on the third day. As expected, he had to glumly withdraw his troops from Bluewater in the evening. A large number of his men had been lost over the course of the day.

The fourth day, he sent all his troops to attack the city; even his cavalymen who weren’t meant to fight in closed spaces had been mobilised. It ended being the day with the worst losses yet.

As for the fifth day... There was no such thing. The Prince had his troops withdraw in the morning, disappearing into the northern horizon. Only a third of his men still remained when they left. Jubilant cries rang in the oasis city throughout the day.

The four-day war had reaped 50,000 lives. This city that wasn’t too large, but it had taken 20,000 imperial soldiers and 30,000 of Richard’s men.

The meat grinder at Bluewater had a minuscule effect on the Iron Triangle Empire, but it was a heavy blow to Prince Salwyn. The battle had spread Richard’s name throughout the Bloodstained Lands.

The reinforcements from the Sequoia Kingdom couldn’t cut Salwyn off in time, so many of the forces withdrew their troops. However, those planning to participate in the Bloodstained Highway project still rushed to Bluewater. In fact, many who

originally hadn't planned on participating changed their mind after hearing the news. They had no place in the army, but they were prepared to make things work. They were reinforcing Richard, so the troops that reached the city had to get something, no?

Three days after the war came to an end, the armies from the Sequoia Kingdom reached Bluewater one by one. The largest force came from Duke Grasberg, an army of 3,000 cavalrymen and a 5,000-strong infantry. The commander was someone Richard had never seen before, Earl Layton.

The rest were entirely unexpected— there was actually an army from Countess Katrina. It had 4,000 men in total, but 500 of them were elite heavy cavaliers. Even the squires of these knights were veterans, numbering 1,500 in total. Level 9 on average, this cavalry force was one that seemed to be no inferior to even Duke Grasberg's. Their lavish equipment was splendid as well.

Richard was rendered speechless at the sight of Katrina's army. The Bloodstained Lands weren't suited for heavy cavalry at all; the Countess's actions were more a show of wealth and power than anything else. However, so long as this army was willing to serve, Richard would not mind having another group of powerful soldiers. The most difficult parts of previous battles had been taken care of by his humanoid warriors.

Zim's expression turned dark when he heard of this army's arrival. Katrina's show was meant specifically for him.

The Direwolf Duke sent over an army of 2,000. Half were footsoldiers, while the rest were a combination of scouts, light cavalry, and knights. There were no heavy cavalrymen or even heavy infantry, but every soldier was well-trained and suited to operating in the Bloodstained Lands. This was a practical army.

When the more than 10,000 new soldiers streamed into Bluewater, Richard finally heaved a sigh of relief. Examining the



ruins of the oasis city, he was amazed by Salwyn's fearsome might once more. If not for mobilising the slaves and overworking himself to control his soldiers in the midst of all the chaos for an entire four days, he truly would have been purged from the Bloodstained Lands.

He found that he had too many things to do. His influence was growing at an unprecedented rate, his army exceeding 10,000 for the first time. However, this was false glory; 90% of his army was made of former slaves who had accumulated enough merits in battle. His initial promise had been to turn any slave who could kill an imperial soldier into a free soldier, but over the two days of intense battle their numbers had dropped below 10,000. Not even he had imagined that the prospect of freedom would make them so fearless in the face of death.

Richard actually didn't need so many men, but seeing the gathering soldiers from the other nobles he changed his mind. He retained every willing slave for now, deciding to prune them in the future. He would still take 10,000 men on the Bloodstained Highway project, but three questions plagued him: whose troops would be taken, who would be left behind, and how would they be reorganised? He knew that failure to take care of these issues within a month would be the end of him.

On top of all that, he also had to deal with the problem of rebuilding Bluewater. Thankfully, he already had the support of a dozen merchant groups and some of the Sequoia Kingdom's nobles. The construction would go much faster than otherwise.

The representative for the Direwolf Duke brought some news as well. Bevry would secretly bring his son to the oasis in ten days, and the letter also mentioned that he was bringing a special item that could be used for a ceremony. Richard was astonished; how did the Duke find an offering in such a short period of time?

However, there was still some time before the Duke's arrival. Taking care of work for the next few days, he took Gangdor along

and made a quick trip back to Norland.

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Richard walked out of the teleportation formation just in time to see priestess Noelene hasten over. She stared at him blankly for a while upon seeing him, before looking him up and down and asking, “What happened to you?”

“Have I changed?” Richard was startled as well, stroking his chin as per habit. When his hand felt a layer of stubble, he finally understood.

Noelene looked at him with a complicated expression. From her perspective, the beard did nothing to detract from his youth. However, this boy that had left only a few days ago had changed greatly upon his return. The delicate elegance had waned, any signs of inexperience completely replaced by the taste of blood and fire. If Richard had been a tall, straight sapling, he was now a blazing rock.

She had seen many people moving between planes, but rarely did someone change so tremendously in such a short period of time. “I sensed the formation being activated and came to take a look,” she deflected, “How long do you plan on staying here?”

Richard placed a magic chest that was nearly as tall as himself on the floor with a dull thud; the thing obviously weighed a few tons. He huffed and stretched his aching body, “No longer than a day, I just brought some stuff over.”

The portal flickered once more and Gangdor walked out. The fellow’s majestic back was bowed, all of his muscles bulging. The floor shook with every step, the three chests he was carrying so heavy he had activated his bloodline ability to force his way through. The brute threw the chests down the moment he could, sitting on the floor and panting hard. The chests that were tied together had weighed ten tons at minimum; even the burly man with Gaia’s Force was exhausted.

“Why are only two of you bringing so much?” the priestess couldn’t hold herself back from asking, “Why not bring more people?”

“I’m too poor. It takes too much to teleport!” Richard hid nothing.

Indeed, the poverty of the Archerons was on an entirely new level. Truth be told, any family that engaged aggressively in planar warfare was bound to never get wealthy. The sudden profits that war could bring was reserved for the winners, and even then most would find it to be a pyrrhic victory.

However, it was the crafters who truly profited from war. Enchanters, blacksmiths, alchemists... Of course, it was the runemasters that earned the most. Thus, facing a royal runemaster who complained that he was poor, priestess Noelene’s first desire was to throw the fellow into a spatial rift.

“What did you bring? Why is it so heavy?” Noelene was rather confused.

Richard opened one of the boxes, revealing grey ore with cloud-like patterns on it. Proficient as she was at appraisal, Noelene immediately cried out in a low voice, “Cloudfire ore! So pure!”

Most of the load this time was cloudfire ore, alongside a few hundred kilograms of lafite. The price disparity between the two planes for these was less than 50%, but since he had the ore and Gangdor could carry it Richard obviously wouldn’t waste his time. Every teleportation cost 20,000 gold!

Richard picked up a piece of ore, “Priestess Noelene, could you help me recruit around fifty mages that are at least level 10? I also need some alchemists and blacksmiths who can handle the more common precious metals; thirty of each.”

Noelene’s eyes lit up, “It seems like you’ve found a plane with a lot of ore! Your luck is pretty good, even I’m growing a little

jealous of Flowsand. You want the mages to enchant different metals, right?”

## Book 3, Chapter 104 - A Difficult Trade

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Richard nodded at Noelene, “Yes. All this ore right now can only be sold for 500,000 gold at most, but once they’re processed into ingots that will rise to 600,000 and enchanting it will add another 100,000 on top. Even with the added costs, I can earn another 100,000 in total.”

“You really are someone from the Deepblue,” Noelene said begrudgingly, “Fine, I’ll help you with the mages and artisans. However, I want those enchanted ingots. I’ll buy them all at 700,000 just like you said.”

“No problem,” Richard’s quick answer brought a smile to Noelene’s face, “I’ll even add the lafite on as a gift.”

The priestess was likely one with many secular connections. If she had the money to buy all the cloudfire, she had to have a fair number of organisations supporting her. At the very least, she was more wealthy than the Archerons. As for how she would use these ingots, what profits she stood to make, he couldn’t care less. Why would anyone work without any benefits? As long as she paid his price, that was enough.

Time was precious short. Richard first sent a paladin from the church to deliver a message to Nyris and Agamemnon before completing the deal with the ores. He opened the chest he had carried over, revealing two compartments. Most of the bottom was cloudfire ore, while on the top were two small and intricate boxes. He carefully opened both and examined the contents, sighing in relief once he found both were fine.

Noelene suddenly asked him a question, “Richard, I can pay for the cloudfire in advance. Is gold fine, or do you want anything else?”

“Can I buy offerings?” Richard asked with a laugh.

The priestess smiled, “I’ll buy if you’re selling.”

Richard chuckled, giving up on the thought. Indeed, offerings could easily be turned to gold but the reverse was not true. As for how the revenue from the cloudfire would be used, he had already made preparations. He took out a scroll made of magic paper and passed it to the priestess, “Please help me with the materials listed here. As for any remaining money, I would like to get some spatial equipment.”

Noelene spread the scroll open and had a close look, “Hmm... Most of the materials here aren’t impossible to get, but they will take time. I don’t think I’ll be able to get them in time. Anyway, a few hundred thousand gold won’t be enough for good spatial equipment. A friend of mine coincidentally has a spatial box she’s planning on giving away. Its external measurements are about the same as those little boxes, and it can hold two cubic metres. It also has a sealing enchantment in it, so the weight is invariant. I should be able to get it for you at 300,000.”

Richard pondered over it for a while before giving his reply, “Alright, I want it!” The box itself was nothing special, but Noelene was offering it at half the market price.

Surprisingly enough, most of the goods Richard had brought were sold before he even left the shrine. The trade of a million gold had left both sides feeling satisfied, but he was obviously the one that was happier. He asked Noelene to help him ready the portal before he left; he was planning to return to Faelor at the same time the next day at the latest.

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Nyris had already rushed over by the time Richard and Gangdor returned to the Archeron Island. The Fourth Prince’s response was so fast it was astonishing. For a moment, Richard even felt like the prince had nothing to do all day.

Nyris was obviously startled at the sight of Richard. The prince’s

eyes twinkled, “Hey Richard, I haven’t seen you for a few days but you’ve already changed so much! That beard is so cool! That coarse shave is an art unto itself!”

The youth’s eyes were practically glowing, making it seem like he would reach over to have a touch in the next second. Richard stroked his hard beard speechlessly; he’d had no time to deal with it during the war, and now he felt like it wasn’t half bad. However, he didn’t have the luxury of someone taking care of his hair. He just looked into the mirror in the morning and trimmed himself a little.

Many nobles spent up to an hour every day on fashion, and the royal family was only worse. Richard’s stubble was completely unlike the normally tidy facial hair of the other nobles, but if the prince found the coarseness stylish then he had nothing to say.

“Take this!” Seeing Nyr’s eyes growing brighter and brighter, Richard shoved a magic box into his hands to stop him from doing anything.

“What’s this?” The prince’s attention was obviously transferred to the box. However, when he opened it up to take a look the contents immediately drew a low exclamation, “Savage Barrier!”

Indeed, within the sealed box were five distinct runes that made up the entire Savage Barrier set. From the perspective of war, Savage Barrier was more practical than Savage Strike. It had been less than ten days since Richard had left, but he had already brought back a second set. Nyr was naturally ecstatic. His destiny was already tied with Richard’s to some extent; the better Richard performed, the higher his own status would be.

“Great, I’ll get you the materials right now. I can give you enough for fifteen sets in advance, so I’m placing an order for three!” Nyr prepared to run out the moment he was done, likely wanting to return to the royal warehouse to collect the materials.

“Wait!” Richard pulled the hasty youth back, “I still have a lot of

materials on hand, I don't need them right now. I wish to use the remuneration to get a batch of magic equipment. Could you help with that?"

"What? How high is your rate of success?" Nyris looked at Richard dubiously, but then he immediately went back to normal, "Whatever. Magic equipment? That's nothing. What do you want, and how much?" The Prince then slapped his chest loudly. It was an action filled with vigour, but when he did it one's mind would run wild.

Richard was delighted, "I'd like a batch of superior swords with two enchantments each. Let's start with 500 first."

"Alright, 500— wait, WHAT?" The last word was almost a cry of misery, almost as pitiful as that of a young girl who had run into a group of perverts.

The cry surprised Richard. He thought through what he had just said, confirming that he wanted superior swords and not epic or legendary equipment. "500. Is that a lot? This sort of sword is worth a little more than 2,000 on the market, right? Based on the price you gave me last time, 500 of them should cost 750,000. This is the same price as for the materials for five sets."

Nyris' forehead started to bead with sweat and he forced a smile, "The price isn't the issue. It's just... that quantity is a little too much."

Richard frowned, "Too much? But I still need armour and shields as well."

Nyris paled a little, hesitating, "How about this, just wait a bit. Ag will be here soon, and the Ironblood Family is known for its enchanters. Also, tell me how many shields and armour sets you want."

Richard thought it over and said, "500,000 gold's worth of shields, half of which should be tower shields that are 1.5 metres



long and the rest a mix of regular shields and bucklers. The armour I'm buying for a million, primarily chain mail."

Nyris' face started to pale as he silently made some calculations.

Agamemnon didn't take too long to arrive. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, he understood Richard's needs and gave Nyris a look filled with pity. The Prince whined loudly, turning his head aside like an uncomfortable teenager.

Richard quickly caught their expressions, "What, is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing at all! I'll have everything ready by the afternoon!" Although he said this, Nyris' tone made it seem like he was acting rashly out of indignance.

Agamemnon shook his head, seemingly enjoying the Prince's misfortune. He then turned to Richard, "Make me three Life's Bane runes if you can. I'll give you the materials at a ten to one ratio. And yes, I'll be able to sell you equipment; this is what I can arrange for."

Agamemnon passed a scroll to Richard, chatting with him for a while before leaving with Nyris in tow.

Richard then called the old steward and Fuschia into the study, asking them about the situation on the island in recent times. He hadn't been away for a long time in Norland time, but already much of the income from Gaton's lands had faded away. This was only to be expected; the disappearance of the Marquess and the bulk of his army left people with all sorts of intentions. While Richard had become a royal runemaster, causing a few people to give up on those ideas, there were still a fair number doing things in the shadows.

Richard just nodded in response, instructing the old butler to keep a list of the resources where income had dropped without taking any action. For now, they would take as much as the people

were willing to give, but still the less than 500,000 coins this season would make maintenance of the island slightly difficult. Based on current trends, the earnings next season would likely be another 100,000 lower.

However, Richard remained calm and didn't pay much heed to the issue, "What about our planar income."

"The Resting Orchid plane that Lord Senma is defending will send us a batch of materials next month, worth about 200,000 on the market. Nothing else."

Richard frowned, "Hmm? What about Asiris, is there no news from him?" Of the three knights that had pledged loyalty to him, Asiris was the strongest.

## Book 3, Chapter 105 - Bankrupted

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“Sir Asiris sent word that the war in the plane has reached its most critical point, and things aren’t going smoothly. He actually hopes the family can send a batch of enchanted crossbow bolts; the defense has used up most of their reserves.”

Richard’s expression changed a little, but he only nodded his head for the moment, “What about Lina?”

The old steward hesitated for a moment, “The Dragon Mage has fallen into an impasse at the Forest plane. She can only hold on for now, and is hoping for some support if you have the strength. However, she told me not to pass on this message if you didn’t seem to have enough money.”

Richard fell into deep thought, fingers continuously rapping the surface of the table. He hadn’t expected Gaton to leave him with no resources and a huge mess to solve. There wasn’t any good news coming from the family planes. They owned two-fifths of the Resting Orchid plane, but it would be difficult for Senma to hold onto it alone. Moreover, that was a plane less than a hundredth the size of Faelor, only a rather large island. Even fully developed the plane wouldn’t be able to generate much revenue, while all the other planes were all in need of support. The Gamma plane, originally the richest of the lost, was currently in the hands of Ward.

He wasn’t sure whether Asiris truly needed any help. On the other hand, he absolutely believed that Lina wasn’t having a good time. Having gone to the Forest plane once himself, the humidity of the strange forests and the violent natives had left a deep impression on him.

Every side was in jeopardy, every plane needed money. However, the resources in his hand were extremely limited. Just one mistake would cause a chain reaction that destroyed everything.

This wasn't surprising if one thought about it. Gaton had basically built himself up from scratch, unleashing a storm in an extremely short period of time. The family's foundation was currently incredibly shallow, only supported by constant expansion. It was like a castle built on a beach; no matter how quickly a magnificent fortress was built, a single mistake would leave every brick falling down. The current Archeron Family, just like any other parvenu, lacked foundation.

There were many aspects to such a foundation. Skilled generals, talented powerhouses, a formidable army, precious resources... Richard's followers had only just started to grow, while Gaton's five knights were only able to maintain the situation in the planes. Any fewer and their defences would fall apart. On the other hand, the knights-in-training had been thinned down to a third after the rebellion. Richard realised he was basically the only source of money in the family now, but his money was needed to fight wars. Just arming 500 elites on Faelor used up over two million gold; as a runemaster himself, there wasn't a single rune knight under him outside of his followers. Of course 500 elites would be more important than three rune knights for now, but in the long term he needed men to hold off the plane's powerhouses.

Although an individual rune knight could not compare to a saint, they could be mass-produced to an extent. In situations where the level difference wasn't too large, quantity was an absolute advantage. For example, three or four rune knights that were equivalent to level 14 would be able to fend off a level 16 warrior without much trouble.

No matter how much he thought about it, Richard couldn't come up with a good response. Not having money was not having money; he couldn't pull gold out of thin air. In fact, he still owed Nyris two sets of equipment; the 1.5 million gold's worth of shields and armour were meant to be materials paid to him in advance.

He waved his hand at the old steward, "Alright, I understand. Go

tell the infantry knights to make preparations, they will be leaving first thing in the morning.”

Only after the old steward left did Richard take out a magic sealing box, pushing it over towards Fuschia, “This is for Alice.”

“A gift for my Lady?” Fuschia smiled like a flower as she took the box, “Let me guess what it is. It couldn’t be a rune, could it?”

Her breath caught when she saw the five runes placed inside the box. Her expression grew solemn as she took a serious look at all the runes, “Savage Strike... Very well, you only owe my Lady seven more sets. I must send this over to her immediately, do you have any more instructions?”

“If you have the time, help me pick out ten more people from the island for when I return. Also, has Alice met with any problems recently? You seem very anxious, she can’t be missing just one rune knight.”

“Yes. A fine vein of iron was found not far from my Lady’s lands, in a barren mountain with no owner. All the nobles in the area are claiming sovereignty over the region, including four earls of the Sacred Tree Empire and a Marquess of the Alliance. Of course, my Lady is staking her own claim as well.”

“Indeed, that is troublesome,” Richard furrowed his brows slightly. The only solution to such a situation was war. Even if nobody was fighting over the mine now, there would certainly be problems in the future.

Richard finally remembered Agamemnon’s list after sending Fuschia away, opening the scroll to carefully read through it. On it were hundreds of items of all sizes, with the quantities not being small either; it seemed like the taciturn youth had some status in his family. However, the prices left Richard quite surprised; they were less than a tenth lower than market price, not much different from the costs of normal merchants. Nyris’ prices were much lower. The two often appeared together, almost inseparable; it was

impossible for Agamemnon to be unaware of Nyris' price. Why then were these prices so much higher?

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At the same time, Nyris was standing next to Emperor Philip's worktable, summoning up the courage to hand over a piece of magic paper. The Emperor strained to move his stout body, taking the paper to have a look; it was an application for a temporary allowance, but it used up almost all of Nyris' additional authority for the year.

Philip placed the paper back on the table, saying monotonously, "You should know applying for such a large amount will impact you greatly. Your budget next year will be no higher than now, and you won't have the right to apply for a loan throughout that period."

"I know, but I already promised Richard!" the Prince said helplessly.

"Didn't expect him to want so much at once?" Philip smiled meaningfully, signing his name on the application, "It seems like the kid is developing faster than I expected. Alright, take this to the warehouse and transfer the items. One must keep their promises, just treat this time as a lesson. Next time, measure your own ability before making promises."

"Understood," Nyris said gloomily.

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Nyris' expression was very unpleasant as he walked out of the royal warehouse, his head bowed down the entirety of the way in thought. He hastened towards the transmission circle, wanting to look for Agamemnon to get a drink with.

Just at that moment, a tall, strong figure suddenly blocked his way. This was a youth dressed in battle armour, undecorated save for the royal family's crest hidden away in one corner. He looked

similar to Nyris, but while the Fourth Prince seemed soft and delicate this fellow had a dark and gloomy aura.

“Fourth brother! I heard you went bankrupt? I came as soon as I could to confirm myself!” the youth said with a clear tone of ridicule.

Nyris’ expression only sank further at the sight, “It’s none of your business!”

The youth laughed heartily a few times, “Why isn’t it my business? You’ve had some momentum recently; outside of that weirdo Second, everyone else is very nervous. But your budget won’t be increased for the next year, and you can’t take any loans either. How do you plan on getting more points? I’m quite willing to throw you a little further.”

“Fuck off!” Nyris spit out viciously, his face frosted over.

Someone as elegant as Nyris suddenly swearing stunned even the Third Prince for a moment. His face swelled up in a flash, reddening from shame and anger, “NYRIS! You’re humiliating the royal family?”

“Is that me or you? Get out of my way, I don’t have time to waste on you!” Nyris smiled coldly.

The Third Prince’s followers had been ready to give way the moment Nyris was enraged, but the youth himself huffed loudly. Their feet seemed to stick to the ground, and they didn’t dare to move. Sandwiched between the two princes, these followers were clearly put in an awkward situation. Cold sweat rolled down their faces, but there were a few who remained exceptionally aggressive and brazen to express their loyalty.

Nyris suddenly calmed down, a slight smile forming on his face, “Very well. If you’re a real man, then just keep wasting my time here. I’m in no hurry anyway.”

The Third Prince’s expression suddenly changed. This was the

path to the royal warehouse; although it was usually quiet, there could be people coming over at any time. An open confrontation between two princes would spell trouble; once Philip caught wind of it, no good would come out of it. Flattery was worth nothing in front of the Emperor, and Philip would be able to find out who was right and who was wrong in just a few questions. None of his own followers dared to lie in the Emperor's presence.



## Book 3, Chapter 106 - Conspiracy

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The Third Prince's expression warped a few times, but eventually he just glared at Nyris and let him go. Nyris' steps were graceful and steady as he made his way into the distance, the Third Prince's expression growing even gloomier at the sight until his eyes were nearly spurting fire. He grabbed a follower beside him, "Go, find out why he used up all of his loan! Use whatever method you want, I want to know!"

At that very moment, the doors of the warehouse slowly opened up. A group of strong, muscular men carried heavy magic chests outside and piled them up into carriages nearby. Soon after, a troop of royal guards escorted the three carriages towards the island's portal.

"Wait!" the third prince stopped the captain, "What are these, and who are they being sent to?"

Seeing that it was the Third Prince, the guard captain immediately replied respectfully, "Magic equipment, purchased by Young Master Richard of the Archeron Family."

"Oh, alright. You can go," the Prince stepped aside while maintaining his composure. It was only after the procession was far away that a shadow flashed in his eyes, "Richard? Don't tell me he's already ganged up with Nyris..."

"Richard?" a follower asked, "Is that the new royal runemaster?"

The Third Prince's expression grew even darker. "Who cares about his status," he said with a snort, "I can give him double what Nyris can! But if he's not interested... Hmph!"

"I hear the dead would be more interested!" a follower tempted, but the Prince said nothing in reply.

.....

The next afternoon, in Faust's most famous restaurant. Nyris

was sat together with Agamemnon once more, but looking at the spread of dishes on the table he actually seemed to have no appetite.

Agamemnon raised his head to glance at him and said harshly, “Eat! I’ll pay the bill.”

“Stop looking down on me!” Nyris shouted in reply, “I should be the one paying bills this month!”

“A pauper has no right to be arrogant,” the normally-silent youth responded, leaving Nyris speechless. The Prince then bowed his head down, pouring his anger onto the table of dishes. Even a full table could not bear being ravished by the two youths, wiped out entirely in the blink of an eye.

Agamemnon called the waiter in, “Another table.”

His tone was very dull, but in the face of a table full of dishes worth nearly 10,000 gold these words sounded somewhat domineering. “You look like you came into money recently,” Nyris snorted.

“Yes, I won a bet and taught several narrow-minded fellows a severe lesson.” Agamemnon was clearly proud of his victory to be saying so many words.

However, Nyris couldn’t care less about his friend’s flaunting. He instead leant against the table listlessly, “Oh, all my points this year... They’re definitely meeting a tragic end!”

However, high spirits returned to the prince in a flash. He pulled at Agamemnon, “Say, Ag, are there any good methods to earn lots of points without much effort?”

Agamemnon snorted, answering with a single word, “Deepblue.”

Nyris immediately grew listless once more. Philip was an eccentric Emperor. Many years ago, he had suddenly introduced an extremely complicated point system to evaluate the performances of his children. Every royal child was given a yearly budget that

depended on their performance in previous years, but they would be given nothing more. Anything could earn points, from growing more powerful individually to obtaining more support for the family to performance in planar wars. The higher the points one accumulated, the higher their budget. And a higher budget was also an easier way to accumulate points. Thus, it was quite easy to fall into a spiral that went either up or down; every royal was racking their brains to maximise their advantages.

And this hitherto unknown system came exactly from the Deepblue. The core of it all came from Her Excellency Sharon. Nyris understood what Agamemnon meant when he mentioned the Deepblue; the legendary mage was a master in mathematics, so he definitely wouldn't be able to find any flaws in her system.

Once he finished his meal, Nyris suddenly found Agamemnon looking at him with an expression that was half anger and half regret.

“What’s wrong?” Nyris began to panic in his heart.

“You forgot something important.”

“What?” the Prince started to feel more and more discouraged.

“Richard. He’s already back at Faelor. Didn’t you wish to go with him?”

“DAMN IT!” the Prince shrieked immediately.

“Treat this as a lesson. You should know to keep calm regardless of setbacks...” Agamemnon’s tone was almost exactly the same as Philip’s. Only when chiding his friend did he not drool in the slightest.

.....

Indeed, Richard was already back in Faelor. He’d spent all of his time in Norland making the proper preparations, leaving him quite satisfied. If not for Nyris giving him such a large batch of supplies from the royal warehouse, he would not have been able to

make such a swift return. It was already late night in Faelor, seven days since he had left.

However, just as he stepped out of the portal he heard a faint shriek coming from the distance; it seemed to be Viscount Zim's voice.

Richard was startled, immediately instructing his followers, "Zim! Hurry, take a look at what's going on!"

Even as those nearby rushed out, Richard scanned his mind for anyone present at the scene. He sensed Phaser at the location, sending down an order for her to check up on the Viscount immediately. However, the special unit did not respond.

Richard did not have the time to wait for her response either; he rushed out of the Lighthouse of Time, casting a haste spell on himself before rushing towards the scream. The Viscount was a sensitive target; over 10,000 elites serving him were present in Bluewater, so he could not meet with any mishap. Having learnt about the significance of the unicorn bloodline, Richard grew anxious; his entire body began to shine with moonforce as he activated the footwork of the elven secret swords, increasing his speed another half-fold as he bounded into the distance like lightning.

The yelling was coming from an ordinary house. Originally burnt down during the attack, it seemed like the roof had only recently been rebuilt. Phaser was standing right outside the door, acting like the matter did not concern her at all.

"Where's Zim?" Richard asked as he neared the door, and she pointed inside the house. He walked in only to find Zim lying on his back, hands covering his neck with a pool of blood at his chest. Richard was taken aback, but closer inspection revealed that the Viscount's heartbeat was still strong and lively; he hadn't sustained any serious injuries at all.

Richard squatted beside the youth, patting his shoulders as he

called out softly, “Zim?”

The fatty’s eyes moved slightly, Richard’s figure reflected in his widened pupils. “Yes... Richard?” he responded weakly, “You’re back?”

Richard frowned, “Mm. Don’t move yet, let me take a look.”

He didn’t expect Zim to suddenly shout his name, throwing himself into his embrace before bursting into tears. Richard was flustered by the Viscount’s actions, eventually using a calming spell to end Zim’s breakdown. The fellow cried on and off as he slowly filled Richard in on the story.

Zim’s womanising attitude had returned recently, and he’d started to pursue beautiful women once more. However, now he had stopped using force and instead tried to seduce them all. The title of the Highland Unicorn was still very useful; over the past few days, he had managed to get his hands on two young beauties one of whom was a cleric of the Goddess of Spring Water. Today, Zim had seen the human side of Phaser’s face and taken her for a fairy; desperately pestering her and making endless promises, he managed to bring her to this house. He had been pleasantly surprised, thinking he was about to have sex, but just after he entered the house a dark silhouette suddenly pounced on him from outside the window. It bit him at his neck, ruthlessly sucking out his blood.

Zim wasn’t a daring fellow by nature. The sight of a large, unknown creature sucking his blood scared him into a breakdown on the spot; he only shrieked repeatedly, falling face-up as his limbs turned ice-cold anticipating death.

Richard pulled down Zim’s hand and looked carefully at his neck. There were two deep marks, making it seem like he had been attacked by one of the giant bats. Zim’s description matched as well, except the wound had already stopped bleeding. The injury wasn’t serious at all; a simple lesser heal would be enough to fix it.

However, aside from his own, where would one find bats big enough to attack humans in Bluewater?

Richard patted Zim's shoulder repeatedly, "Alright, you'll be fine! We just need to find a random cleric to treat you, let's look for that girl you hooked up with!"

Zim was overjoyed, "Really? But can she do it? Her skills in bed are much better than her magic."

Richard stood up and pulled the fatty to his feet as well, stuck between laughter and tears, "Hurry! It might be poisonous!"

Zim was scared immediately, rushing out of the house and into the distance. Richard made his way out as well, looking at Phaser who wanted to sneak away. "Stop right there!" he said in a deep voice, "What exactly happened?"

Phaser slowed her footsteps, but without even turning her head she mumbled a string of words that nobody could understand. The problem was that even Richard had no idea what she was saying. "Stop playing tricks, speak!" he shouted

Phaser subconsciously pulled back, speaking slowly, "Zim thought I was a human female and wanted to do the things you and Flowsand always do. I lured him into a place with no one and called an elite bat to bite him. He won't die or become disabled anyway."

## Book 3, Chapter 107 - Conspiracy(2)

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“The bat won’t kill him, but it’ll scare him to death!” Richard said on the edge between laughter and tears, “You think a noble brat like him can endure scares like that?”

“Aren’t you also a noble, Master?” Phaser asked.

“I’m not counted. I spent my childhood in a small mountain village.” A faint melancholy tinted Richard’s voice, memories of his childhood surging to his mind. He didn’t notice that Phaser had managed to divert the topic.

However, he was somewhat astonished that Phaser managed to command an elite bat. He suddenly discovered a bat rapidly flying into the distance, heading for the Land of Turmoil at full speed. ‘Weird, why would the bat suddenly leave without my command?’ It seemed to be returning to the broodmother’s side, but no matter how many commands Richard gave it did not respond at all.

The drone was out of control? Richard’s expression instantly grew gloomy, ‘Broodmother, what’s going on? Why is this bat not obeying orders?’

The broodmother’s consciousness connected to his in a moment, its response neither too fast nor too slow, “Just a defective unit. I already discovered the problem with it, so I forced it to return so I can repair it.”

Richard felt like the matter wasn’t as simple as it seemed. This was likely the bat that had bitten Zim. However, the broodmother’s next words caused him to throw it all aside, “Master, I’ve finished my evolution to level 6. I need you to decide on my direction.”

In the next instant, a veritable deluge of information flooded his mind. However, a quick scan revealed that there wasn’t much of a difference from when she had advanced to level 5. Her personal

evolutionary options were still the same, the most special of the lot being a second mind. One addition was in the drone list; outside of normal battle drones, she could now create mounts.

There were many types of mounts she could create as well, ranging from common creatures like horses, lions, tigers, and wolves to enormous scorpions, ants, and spiders. On top of this hierarchy was a special option—the manticore! Of course, the broodmother could only spawn level 10 creatures at best now; this manticore was about the same size as an ordinary lion.

Despite the minimal change in the number of options, every option was now described with ten times the detail. It was to the extent that Richard almost felt like the broodmother needed more details to advance.

Even though the manticore was powerful, Richard immediately vetoed the idea after reading up on the details. It cost far too much to spawn: she could only build one every two days.

Simulating many combinations over and over again, he eventually settled on humanoid knights mounted on warhorses. The broodmother could create three in a day, with each one around level 10. If they were given the enchanted equipment that he'd brought back from Norland, they could each go toe to toe with a level 11 knight.

“Master, I have a better proposal. You should consider it,” the broodmother responded to the idea instantly. However, Richard didn't know what to do with her idea at all; it was nothing creative, just a bunch of centaurs!

Still, this was a superior proposal. Without any difference in power, the broodmother could create four centaurs in a day. “How did you think of this?” he asked.

“I discovered a centaur tribe in the depths of the Land of Turmoil and wiped them out. Afterwards, I analysed them and came up with these drones.”



“Oh,” Richard pondered over it for a moment, “Alright, but still just follow my original proposal. It’s difficult to integrate centaurs into a human kingdom; I don’t want to waste the time explaining things to nobles and priests again and again. The throwers are already getting troublesome.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Right, can you recreate any species of creature you eat?”

“Not entirely. Some races are more difficult to analyse than others; in fact, I can only build a very small section of creatures right now. The more advanced the race, the more difficult it is to perform the analysis.”

“Okay then, humanoids it is. As for your individual evolution, you can use the remaining divinity for a second consciousness,” Richard decided very quickly.

The broodmother had finally reached level 6! This meant he would be supplied with a hundred powerful soldiers every month that could each become a titled knight in Faelor. Time was absolutely on his side! However, in the midst of all this excitement, Richard forgot about the elite bat that had ‘gone out of control’.

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That bat flew to the Land of Turmoil in just half a day’s time, circling in the air once before identifying its target and diving down.

In an open space in the forest, the broodmother was lying on the ground. Her abdomen pulsed at regular intervals, constantly spurting out a dense acidic mist from her spiracles. Her figure didn’t continue to grow with this evolution, instead shrinking down slightly. The skin grew increasingly dark, but it still remained translucent enough to show a pale gold radiance deep within.

The elite bat swooped down from the sky, hovering before her

and dripping some crimson blood from its hollow fangs. The blood was drawn in by an invisible force, floating into the broodmother's mouthpiece. The bat fell head-first to the ground after it was drained of blood, twitching for a while before it stopped moving completely. The pulses of the broodmother's abdomen clearly sped up, her dozens of compound eyes flickering as she analysed something at full speed. A spiritual aura surged around her, the absorbed divinity powering this analysis.

It took days for the flickering of her eyes to stop. The broodmother's entire body suddenly flashed the colours of the rainbow, only dimming after a few hours. She eventually propped up her huge body with much difficulty, crawling ahead a few steps before falling back to the ground.

She was clearly extremely weak, behind her a white egg that was twice the normal size. When the shell cracked open, what made its way out was actually a pony! This silver pony was incomparably magnificent, its splendour enhanced by the milky-white horn growing on its forehead.

The pony made a long neigh, making a few rounds on the spot before suddenly jumping up and galloping in the direction of the Bloodstained Lands. It was gone in a flash.

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It was early in the morning. Having just completed a rune, Richard stretched his back and glanced outside the window; the rosy colour of dawn was slowly spreading across the sky. He smiled involuntarily; this was an exhausting night, but it had a great harvest.

A clear neigh suddenly echoed in the courtyard, a magical sound that caused even Richard's heart to tense. He bent over the window, looking down to see a magnificent silver horse in his courtyard. His eyes immediately fell onto the horse's forehead.

“Unicorn!”

The broodmother's voice rang out in his consciousness once more, "Master, I used the remaining divinity from the evolution to create another special unit. However, there were no choices except this. It is an infant unicorn; although young, it has the potential to grow. However, its bloodline isn't very pure so it cannot match up to a true sacred unicorn."

"It's really a unicorn?" Richard was still in shock.

"I'm certain."

His heart suddenly stirred and he asked coldly, "Where did you get the unicorn bloodline?"

"There are no rules to the birth of a special unit, Master. I cannot understand why the orcish divinity would condense into a unicorn either, it is the Dragon's will." With these words, the broodmother completely pushed the responsibility off herself.

Richard snorted in disbelief. Still, this was an unexpected reward. To possess the mythical unicorn as his mount... the natural ability to both break and enhance spells made unicorns the best mounts for mages. However, few such creatures existed in the myriad planes; they were even rarer than dragons.

Several days later, the fact that Richard now had a unicorn as his mount spread throughout Bluewater. Everyone found it to be inconceivable at first, but thinking of the legendary mage and new god standing behind the runemaster things started to make sense. However, Zim's expression when he saw the mount was peculiar and interesting.

While the army was still being reorganised, a mysterious group of soldiers entered the oasis city. The Direwolf Duke and Perrin appeared in Richard's home at night, the Duke personally carrying a magic chest that he unsealed in front of Richard and Flowsand. Inside the chest was a black jade idol; although it wasn't too big, a faint divine radiance was streaming out. The moment the chest was open, Richard felt like he had heard an enraged roar.

“This is an ancestral statue of the Juno Family. Earl Juno was once a legendary powerhouse, but it has already been a millennium since his death. I feel like this statue should be able to satisfy Miss Flowsand’s requirements.”

Although Bevry’s voice was rather dull, Richard knew just how powerful families with legendary beings in their history were. Even if they were only earls now, they would still be amongst the top class. The powerful aura radiated by this statue guaranteed that Juno had left a fragment of his soul in it.

Flowsand looked at Richard for a moment and said, “This is enough to hold a sacrifice that can attract the blessings of the Eternal Dragon. However...”

Bevry’s happy face froze, and Flowsand sighed before continuing, “I know you need a blessing of time, but that might not come up during the ceremony. You should understand that randomness is an inherent characteristic of worshipping the Eternal Dragon.”

The Direwolf Duke frowned, “What do we do if that is not the case? Perrin cannot hold on much longer.”

## Book 3, Chapter 108 - Untitled

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Flowsand muttered to herself for a bit before responding to the Direwolf Duke, “Richard has an orcish idol that can be used as an offering. It might not be as good as the one you have, but there won’t be much difference in a sacrifice. However, it is my duty to inform you that a blessing of time might not appear even with two offerings. Hmm... the chances of failure are more than half.”

Bevry turned pale, “Is there no way to guarantee it? Once the existing Dewdrop of Life is exhausted, Perrin might... no, he definitely won’t be able to live another year.”

Flowsand sighed, some hesitation in her reply, “I’m a titled priestess of the Eternal Dragon. There truly is a way to increase the chances of Perrin obtaining a blessing of time, but it will come with a price. If he draws the blessing by luck, he can obtain at least ten years. However, if I ensure he gets it that will fall to only three.”

This was a difficult question to answer. The Direwolf Duke’s expression fluctuated constantly for a while, but eventually he grew resolute. “I want the guaranteed three,” he said with a deep voice.

Flowsand nodded.

“I will be able to obtain more offerings in the three years I get.” Bevry’s voice held an unshakeable determination. He wasn’t saying these words to Richard or Flowsand, but to himself.

Richard sighed gently, “Your Grace, I brought you some items. Come, let’s have a look.”

He took the Duke to the warehouse where the enchanted swords, shields, and armour sets were placed. Every item was of superior quality, surpassing that of Bevry’s most elite knights. The Duke only had about a hundred personal guards; it wasn’t that there

were no others qualified for such a lofty position, but he just didn't have the means to arm them befittingly.

Bevry couldn't help but take a deep breath at the sight. The quality of this equipment wasn't heaven-defying, but in these numbers... Such a large amount of enchanted equipment in one place was a rare sight in Faelor. If an entire troop could be equipped with this, it would become invincible!

The mages of Faelor were a lazy bunch. Even if one had the money, it was difficult to find so many enchanted items.

"What do you want for these items?" the Duke asked bluntly.

"3,500 for the swords, 2,000 for the shields, and 5,000 for an armour set. All one hundred sets combined will cost 1,050,000 gold. You can pay any way you like; gold, ore, whatever." Richard was quite straightforward, quoting the same price he had to Devon. Of course, the prices in the Bloodstained Lands were at least 30% cheaper than in the human countries.

"Alright, I'll give you some soldiers, a novice knight and cloudiron ingots for the exchange. If this isn't everything you have, I'll take it all!" the Direwolf Duke immediately showed his true character.

"Deal!" Richard said with a smile.

Three days later, a secret sacrifice was held in the Lighthouse of Time. Perrin gained three more years of life, and Bevry left quietly the very next day. Before they parted, Richard and Perrin talked for an entire night. Richard asked the youth a lot of questions regarding planar geometry, and was deeply impressed by his talent. The topic naturally shifted to magic halfway through, and after a lot of hesitation Richard eventually handed him a tome from Norland. The tome had a lot of content; the meditation technique was top-notch by Faelor's standards, but on top of that it also described a lot of spells. In there were a few spells Faelor did not possess at all.

Noticing Perrin's shock as he read the book, Richard said profoundly that the world of magic was boundless. Since he no longer had to worry about living, he could finally embark on a path to power. Perrin was obviously tempted; mortals had no ability to resist powers that could destroy mountains.

The night the Duke left, Richard sat down in front of his window and stared out quietly at the crimson moon. He didn't think nor act, just enjoying the peace as though he was an old man. Flowsand was in his arms, twirling her long hair.

"Why give Perrin the tome?" the priestess asked lazily, voice as tired as a cat craving sleep.

Richard responded with a question of his own, "Do you think there will be any change to Faelor if another grand mage comes up?"

"This plane has had legendary mages before, what's so strange with a grand mage?" Flowsand was becoming lazier and lazier in his arms.

A short beard, Flowsand in his arms, no need to think too much. Just sleeping and eating, this was a simple happiness. It felt like true happiness. Richard smiled, explaining in detail, "Forget one, even ten grand mages won't affect Faelor at all. But magical mathematics is different, especially planar geometry. It's a source of fire; once it starts burning, it can ignite the entire plane and push Faelor into a new golden era.

"Perrin isn't far from lighting that match. I just hope he can become a grand mage in the future, instead of a great prophet who could change the course of the entire plane."

"Perrin is a genius, aren't you afraid that he will surpass you in the future?"

Richard laughed, "I'm not afraid of a level 14 battle priest as I am now. Why would I be scared of a future grand mage?"

Flowsand went silent, but she stretched her hand into Richard's robes and pinched a soft piece of flesh.

A painful scream rang out under the moon.

A distance away, Waterflower's ears twitched. The young lady was sitting in a warm hall where almost all of Richard's followers had gathered. Everyone smiled at the sound of their master's scream, and Olar spoke with envy, "Master has such a great relationship with Miss Flowsand!"

Zim nodded hard, echoing the opinion. He'd already forgotten about when he had attempted to snatch Flowsand from Richard, now regarding her as an idol.

Waterflower was the only one whose face darkened slightly, while Phaser subconsciously started polishing the blade that was her left hand. Extinction did not require polishing, however; the blade would always remain sharp.

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Time flies. In the blink of an eye, a month and a half had passed in silence. Richard had finally finished organising the Bloodstained Highway army. He retained 6,000 slave soldiers; these men didn't have much in the way of equipment, but they were second to none in valour. The three churches sent another group of clerics as well, almost turning out in full strength. Before they set off, a mysterious team of knights joined Richard's side. Each was level 10, covered head to toe in the finest of magical equipment. The most shocking part was that there were actually 150 of them!

Even Duke Bevry himself only had a hundred elite guards, but Richard had half a fold more. More importantly, each elite was armed with magic equipment!

With the full support of the Sequoia Kingdom's nobles, he gathered a mixed force of 20,000 men. The only issue was that the number of men exceeded the limit at which he could freely control



them, but this was a good problem to have.

Just as the Bloodstained Highway project was about to recommence, a number of uninvited guests came to Bluewater. A few hundred guards escorted more than a dozen mages, one of whom was level 15. Richard knew there weren't many mages in Faelor, so he had no choice to pay attention to this troop even though almost every small town in Norland had the same number.

The moment the group entered the city, they headed directly for the most luxurious inn. One of the younger mages arrogantly told the guards to have Richard go and meet them immediately.

Richard was quite surprised when he received the message. He truly couldn't recall just when he had gotten to know so many mages who were all so arrogant. However, it was still only a dozen or so of them alongside a few hundred soldiers. He brought along his followers and battle drones, knowing full well that he could kill them all within an hour. He wouldn't even have any qualms fighting the opposing level 15 directly; with the Twin of Destiny in hand coupled with his own bloodlines and runes, he wasn't afraid of any mage below level 17 in Faelor. At minimum, he was certain that he could escape.

Still, he decided to go meet them. After all, this was the first time he was formally coming into contact with Faelor's local mages.

The inn had been booked completely. By the time he arrived, Richard saw many nobles he was well-acquainted with leaving the place with luggage in hand. He was taken aback at the sight, having to stop one that he knew, "Baron Senton, you're leaving?"

The middle-aged noble shook his head, "How could I? The Bloodstained Highway project is about to resume. Just a change of accommodation; the inn was booked by the mages, and I don't want to offend them. They hail from the Mage Association."

"Alright!" Richard laughed, seeing the man off before he walked to the inn with a face full of disappointment. This was one of the

first buildings to be restored after Salwyn's raid, and it had been specially given to the nobles who participated in the Bloodstained Highway project. It was also the most luxurious place in the entire city. To evict all the nobles within reeked of arrogance.

## Book 3, Chapter 109 - Association

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Richard didn't like people being so arrogant in his lands. Instead of entering right away, he waited for a while for Rolf and Viscount Zim to join him. No matter who these mages were, before a saint and a viscount whose family possessed incredible power they would have to show a modicum of restraint.

When he entered the top floor of the inn and sized up the environment, his expression turned completely gloomy. He started stroking his short beard, a new habit that allowed him to suppress the rage in his heart.

The suite had already been refurbished, with seven chairs placed in the centre of which five already had mages seated in them; only the large chair in the middle and the one on the far right were still empty. All the mages present were rather old, ranging from level 10 to 12, but they wore impossibly luxurious robes decorated with gorgeous magic circles.

Richard himself was a master of magic circles. Although he wasn't confident enough to say he was the best in all of Faelor, no ordinary mage could compare with him. He could tell with a single look that these magic circles were so useless he had to think hard to figure out their purpose. In the end, he came up with two uses that weren't really uses at all: one was to enhance the aura to make their identities obvious, while the other was just aesthetics.

Several warriors were stood against the wall, their golden armour similarly complex, exquisite, and luxurious. They were likely the mages' guards.

What left Richard speechless was the fact that there were only the seven chairs in the entire hall. Forget the people he had brought with him, there wasn't even a seat for himself. This was his territory they were talking about!

Seeing the group of three enter, a thin old mage on the left end

opened his eyes slightly. He couldn't help but shiver when his gaze swept over Rolf, finally growing a little straighter, but that was all. He looked at Richard once more, envy and resentment flashing in his eyes at Richard's youth and power. The old coot seemed to be fifty or sixty already, but he was only level 10. Richard's level clearly provoked him.

He stared at Richard from the corner of his eyes, asking in a purposefully cold manner, "You're Richard?"

"Yes, and this is my territory," Richard answered indifferently. He was in no rush to raise difficult questions, instead wanting to see what these sudden entrants wanted to do. Of course, he wouldn't mind killing them in one stroke either. The five coots were sat so close to each other one fireball could wipe them out.

The mage nodded his head, saying arrogantly, "Master Kamy wants to meet you. Stand and wait."

This time, the expressions of Rolf and Zim changed as well. The former was still okay, his expression only darkened a little; the saint wasn't someone so transparent. On the other hand, Zim's plump face started to distort. The Viscount was someone who could do as he pleased in the Sequoia Kingdom, a tyrant who could snatch from all he saw. Even Richard had experienced his arrogance. In the entirety of the Kingdom, nobody outside of shrews like Countess Katrina could control him. Of course, Richard inspired a terror in Zim's heart that was second only to Katrina herself.

Still, enraged as he was, the Viscount only had the guts to reprimand these mages. Even the King had to be considerate of a behemoth like the Mage Association; Zim was sure these fellows wouldn't do anything to him, but making a move against the Association was impossible.

Just as a string of rude words made its way to Zim's lips, Richard suddenly raised a hand to stop him. "Alright, I'll just wait for a

while.”

After that, Richard truly did just stand in the centre of the hall and wait patiently. However, this only left the five mages growing more and more uneasy. The temperature in the hall seemed to be dropping gradually, forcing two mages who weren't good with the cold to fight back a few shudders.

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Standing next to a window in the study room was an old mage in golden robes. His hair was almost all gone, leaving a thinly-spread circle of white on a shiny head. The man's face was full of excess fat, the marks of time all over it. Next to the old mage was a middle-aged man wearing the same silver-patterned robes as the mages outside. The two mages were entranced by the formation of humanoid warriors not far away.

The middle-aged man suddenly raised a finger with excitement, “Master Kamy, look at those soldiers! Every one of them has a magic sword of superior quality in their hands! This equipment... even I could only produce one per month at most. But here... At least eighty warriors, meaning eighty superior-quality longswords! Wait, they have shields on their backs too! Heavens, those shields are magic equipment as well!”

A tinge of colour flashed across the muddy eyes of the old mage. His pupils reflected the magical glow, a trace of unconcealable greed on his face.

The middle-aged mage suddenly turned serious, “Taxes! We must collect taxes! All magic equipment must go through the mage association before sale. The Mage Association is the final destination of all mages!

Kamy slowly nodded his head, “That's a good statement, the Mage Association is the final destination of all mages. We should build a bridge for mages to communicate with the world, and they need only progress on the path of magic. This equipment is too

dangerous for an ordinary mage, it should be controlled by the Association. Let us wise men decide their use and destination.”

“Your decision truly is brilliant!” the middle-aged man praised greatly, rubbing his hands in excitement, “So much magic equipment. If we had it all, our annual income would rise by 30%! But that Richard...”

“Let’s make him a silver robe!” Kamy said in a deep voice.

The middle-aged mage was stunned, “A silver robe? But that’s a high level, he doesn’t even look twenty! We have all struggled on the path of magic for more than twenty years and contributed ten years of our youth to the Association. Six of the mages who wish to become silver robes are nearing sixty years of age, what would they think if we give the position to Richard?”

“That truly is a problem, but if I remember correctly all six of them only reached level 10 with much difficulty. Richard is already level 12, his level is even higher than yours.”

“Master Kamy, the silver robe is a symbol of status. It should be given out based on contribution to the Association, not just level. If Richard acquires a spot, we will have no choice but to reject one of the experienced older mages. I think we should give him a reserve position at most,” the middle-aged man was oddly persistent about the issue.

Kamy sighed, “I understand what you mean, but don’t forget. For Richard to reach his current heights at such a young age, he has to have an extremely high-levelled mage behind him! Just that alone makes him deserving of a silver robe.”

“But...” The middle-aged mage still wanted to insist, but was interrupted by a wave of Kamy’s hand. He begrudgingly nodded his head, but thinking back to the benefits promised to him by a specific silver robe candidate he felt a thorn in his heart.

Kamy looked at the middle-aged mage with a gaze indicating he

clearly understood everything, saying without hurry, “Alright, we should go out. Richard has already waited for some time, the youths of today do not have much patience.”

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Richard had remained standing for an entire ten minutes before the door leading from the study to the hall opened. Kamy and the middle-aged man walked out, the former calmly seating himself on the central chair and speaking to Richard with a light smile, “You must be Richard. You truly are young.”

The middle-aged man sat on the last empty chair, interrupting Richard before he could even answer, “This is Master Kamy, an elder of the Sequoia Kingdom Mage Association. All mages must accept the oversight of the Association, for an elder to come personally to your territory is a rare honour!”

Richard stroked his beard just as before, ignoring the middle-aged man and turning to Kamy, “Master Kamy, you can’t only be here to visit a ruined city, right?”

Kamy made an indication to the middle-aged mage, and the man responded with no traces of politeness, “Richard, we discovered a large amount of magic equipment entering the Sequoia Kingdom from you. Is this true?”

“Yes, the equipment comes from my master’s workshop.”

The middle-aged mage huffed, his voice turning cold, “The trading rights of superior-grade magic equipment in the Sequoia Kingdom belong solely to the Mage Association. If you want to sell to the lords of the Kingdom, you must first acquire the sale rights and pay tax!”

“Oh? And what is the tax rate?” Richard still didn’t bat an eyelid at the hostility.

“For every ten pieces of magic equipment you sell, you must hand over three... No, four as tax!” The man’s voice grew louder and

louder, the greed in his eyes growing difficult to conceal.

Richard's expression grew cold. Just as he was about to say something, Kamy softly knocked on the armrest of his chair to quiet the middle-aged mage down. The old man was incredibly satisfied with his imposing manner, coughing once before saying amiably, "Richard, the Mage Association is the final destination of all mages. We collect tax to provide financial support to those under us and allow the light of magic to shine upon all of Faelor. As mages, we have no need to personally participate in such a greedy thing as an exchange of money. You also have a second option; sell all your equipment directly to the Association. I personally recommend this."



## Book 3, Chapter 110 - Rift

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Richard reached out and pulled a longsword out from Viscount Zim's waist, throwing it to Kamy, "How much will you be buying for? Take this sword, for example."

The old mage reached out and caught the blade, his movements rather agile for his age. Inspecting the weapon, any displeasure caused by Richard's attitude was swept away. He gently touched the tip with his hands, gaze burning brighter and brighter; this was one of the enchanted longswords Richard had brought back from Norland, casually given to Zim. In Kamy's eyes, everything from the craftsmanship to the enchantments was top-notch, all ideal choices. The engravings were simple in design, but they were filled with a proud flair. This was not a taste ordinary craftsmen could possess; only a great mage with profound attainments in the arts could produce such a piece.

Richard smirked at the sight. Norland's magic was far ahead of Faelor's; of course, even a standard sword from the royal family would be a masterpiece here.

The old Mage finally let out a long breath, "This sword is of excellent quality. If you sell it to the Association, we will buy it at... 2,000 gold."

"HOW much?" Richard had felt a bad omen, but Kamy's greed still far exceeded his imagination. If this sword was manufactured in Faelor, 2,000 gold wouldn't even be enough to cover manufacturing cost.

Kamy seemed to realise he'd gone overboard, "Fret not, I haven't finished yet. To make up for your contributions, we will immediately make you a distinguished silver robe mage of the Association. This is a very respectable position."

The smile on Richard's face had finally disappeared, voice turning cold, "Tell me, who gave you the right to collect taxes on

my lands?”

The middle-aged man suddenly stood up, “RICHARD! Don’t forget that you are a mage as well. All mages must abide by the orders of the Association! Are you going to defy us?”

Richard stroked his beard and sneered, “Order? What if I say no?”

The man’s face turned cold. “Then you are a sinner!” he said sinisterly, “Come with us. The elders of the Association will try you for your crimes!”

“The Association?” Richard couldn’t really fully put his ridicule into words, ending up with a simple question, “You want me to obey a bunch of greedy old fuckers like you?”

Richard could feel the hollowness of the Mage Association the moment the insult left his mouth. The inheritance of the Deepblue was extremely profound, a hundred thousand miles apart from whatever this stupid Association was meant to be. Even Rolf rolled his eyes, while Zim burned with resentment. If not for the deep trauma Richard had left in him, the Viscount would have wanted to go and start an argument with the mage opposite them. The resounding reputation of the Highland Unicorn was not gained by sleeping around alone; commanding armies, killing, arguing, Zim felt like he could do everything now. Although it wasn’t a good idea for a Viscount to fall out with a huge body like the Mage Association, Zim had never been someone who acted based on rationality.

“Boss, it’s useless to talk to these guys!” The Viscount was quite euphemistic. He wasn’t stupid enough to tell Richard that he was not their opponent.

The middle-aged man jumped up, his fingers almost poking Richard’s nose as he screamed, “HOW DARE YOU INSULT THE MAGE ASSOCIATION? Do you want to take on the Kingdom’s 300 noble mages? In the name of the Association, I announce that all

your enchanted weapons have been confiscated. Your magical bloodline will be cut off, leaving you unable to cast spells for the rest of your life! Someone, come!”

The soldiers in the room answered loudly, drawing their swords in Richard’s direction. The silver robe mages all stood up as well, looking ready to attack. Rolf snorted loudly, emitting his aura as a saint to keep them at bay, but even though they didn’t dare to attack the stares from the mages were not friendly. Clearly, a saint would not be enough to put them off.

Richard seemed to fall into deep thought, stroking his beard for a long time. He suddenly spoke to Kamy, “Oi, do you know why I stood here waiting for an entire ten minutes?”

Kamy sat up straight, his once-turbid eyes growing incomparably sharp. He snorted, waiting for Richard to continue. However, Richard didn’t speak; his left hand waved, a fist landing ruthlessly on the face of the middle-aged mage!

The sound of bones cracking echoed through the room as the mage flew out like a ragdoll. Blood spurted from a crushed nose, leaving a string of crimson beads in the air. The man felt like he had been attacked by an ogre warrior; his body flew into the wall before he slowly slid down to the ground. He crumpled down like a rag sack; he would not be getting up for a long time.

Even a mage from Norland would be left dizzy after a punch like that, forget one from Faelor. Kamy had authority and magic, but his noble status had ensured that he hadn’t been on the battlefield for more than a decade. His reaction was several times slower than in his youth; he only came to his senses a while after Richard’s punch.

Richard’s knuckles were still clenched tightly as he slowly withdrew his fist, letting out a long breath, “Ah, that feels so much better!”

Kamy stared at him blankly, the rest of the silver robes like

statues as they couldn't believe their own eyes. Richard finally answered his earlier question, "Right, the reason why I didn't mind waiting ten minutes was so my soldiers could get here. ASSEMBLE!"

The moment the order went out, several large holes were smashed open in the wooden wall. Humanoid figures, dressed in heavy armour and armed with shields and axes rushed into the room, clanging their weapons. All of the Mage Association's soldiers were defeated in an instant, the situation firmly in Richard's control. The heavy infantrymen showed no mercy to the silver robes either; heavy shields rammed into faces to send any spells back into the mages' bellies. The humanoids pinned the dizzy old mages to the ground one by one, placing their axes on their necks.

The gold robe mage was the only one who was safe. This was because he maintained his original posture, sitting still without a move. Kamy was old, but he was not senile. He knew that the slightest of actions would meet with a bad end.

The old mage's expression changed a little and he stood up abruptly, pointing at Richard as he said gloomily, "No one who made an enemy of the Mage Association has met a good end."

Richard sneered, "As far as I understand it, you're the ones who came looking for trouble."

Kamy squinted his eyes like a treacherous snake, "Regardless of your understanding, you have made a powerful enemy today. You will be uprooted, your family and friends burdened! If I were you, I would pay constant attention to my life from now on. You might be buried anywhere in the Sequoia Kingdom. You should know, Finger of Death is a fascinating spell!"

Richard smiled, "So there truly is no way to reason with you. You dare threaten me?" Without waiting for Kamy to respond, he suddenly stepped forward and sent a right hook at the old mage's

chin. The man was sent flying out of the inn, planting down heavily on the ground without the ability to get up. In such a scenario, his level was useless.

The silver robe mages wanted to charge forward, but they wisely gave up all resistance under the threat of shining axes. The hatred in their eyes almost made Richard send out the order to kill them all.

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The next day, hundreds of soldiers escorted the dozen mages out of Bluewater. None of the mages was held back, but there were still a few differences from their arrival. Firstly, two high-ranked mages were left lying in a carriage. Also, the mages and warriors had all been stripped of their belongings, instruments, and weapons. They would return to the Kingdom as beggars.

Two days later, the Bloodstained Highway army set off once more. Zim was riding alongside Richard, and couldn't help but ask, "Boss, why did you just let those guys go? The Mage Association will definitely announce that you are a dark mage and will order your arrest."

Richard was silent for a moment, but then he said indifferently, "If they dare to come, I'll kill all of them. I don't believe those old fellows aren't afraid of death."

The Viscount immediately grew excited, "You're amazing, boss! You don't even care about the Mage Association! Right, let's uproot them!"

That statement left Richard in a mix of humour and rage. He had done his research on the Mage Association in the past few days, finding out that they were the same as churches in that they were independent of nobility. The Mage Association in the Sequoia Kingdom actually exceeded the churches there in terms of status and resources, but then again outside of the three weak goddesses most other churches were spread across countries and even

continents. The Mage Association was not a single entity like a church was, however; there were dozens of them, large and small, throughout the continent. It was possible for a few mages from the lands of several independent mages to form an association, but at the same time there were large empires with multiple associations in them.

The Association, the aristocracy, and the theocracy were always in a race for benefits. With a monopoly on magic equipment and advanced medicine, the Mage Association tended to accumulate astonishing sums of wealth. In turn, this wealth supported the expansion of the Association's influence. Zim's hatred was very normal. No powerful aristocrat was fond of competing powers like the churches and the Mage Association.

# Book 3, Chapter 111 - A Conflict That Cannot Be Resolved

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Given his skill at appraisal, Richard knew that any piece of enchanted equipment was a high-quality item in Faelor, making the craft of enchanting one of the most profitable on the plane. The swords that cost 1,500 gold in Norland required at least 3,000 gold to manufacture in Faelor. Still, despite the vast price disparity, there was also no guarantee of a steady supply.

Thus, when Richard dumped hundreds of superior-grade magic items into the market, it had garnered the attention of the Mage Association. Some preliminary investigation easily led them to the source of this new batch of high-quality equipment.

Richard had basically affected the Association's primary source of income, which was why so many mages had come to his door. The Association in the Sequoia Kingdom prioritised preserving the status quo, followed by bringing him under their control. In other words, exterminating the variable was the most beneficial to their interest. As for the equipment he had already sold, they would naturally collect it all. They hoped such quality equipment would never be sold in bulk ever again; that way, they could maintain their exorbitant prices.

This was why Kamy had come with such harsh conditions. If Richard bowed, he would turn into a labourer for the Association. If not, it would give them a reason to exterminate him. As for whatever teacher was supporting him from behind, the Association with eleven grand mages felt like they had no need to fear any single mage. Of course, these so-called 'grand mages' were Faelor's grand mages, not level 18 like in Norland.

Richard himself would definitely not give up on such a profitable venture. The standard weapons and armour were only a start; truly precious goods like epic or even legendary-grade items were

soon to come. They could be sold for an astronomical price on Faelor, allowing him to buy even more resources. These resources would be turned into wealth back in Norland, used to grow his strength. This would form a foundation of income that strengthened him by the day.

Thus, there was a fundamental conflict of interest with the Mage Association. He had only two options— be taken advantage of, or destroy the enemy. There was no room for discussion. The only reason he'd allowed Kamy to return was to delay the war as long as possible. Regardless, mere gold and silver mages were terribly weak and wouldn't be much of a threat at all.

A total of 15,000 men followed Richard on his second campaign, of which a full third were his own. However, most of the men this time were slaves from the fight in Bluewater. Outside of the 150 new humanoid knights, there were only 200 humanoid warriors and a mere 150 throwers left. The losses to his drone army during the defense had been dire.

Still, there was good news to be had. Phaser was level 10 already, and Waterflower was showing signs of advancing herself. He himself had a ways to go before he reached level 13, but his focus was currently on his astral affinity from the elven bloodline. The two existing branches had been strengthened, while a third was beginning to form.

He was excited to see what new ability he would be able to unlock. Even the two existing branches now had dozens of leaves on them, allowing him to see a dozen or so astral rays every time he entered meditation. The large grade 2 astral rays were showing at a much higher frequency, to the point that he couldn't even catch them all. On top of that, his body was starting to refine the ambient energy in his surroundings into mana, increasing his regeneration rate. He already recuperated his mana pool at twice the rate of an ordinary mage.

Thankfully, the Mage Association's visit was not without



benefits. Richard had actually found close to a hundred mana crystals combined on all the mages present, a huge sum of wealth that equalled about 500,000 gold in the human countries. It would allow the level 6 broodmother to create a new type of drone for 60 crystals, leaving 40 more for her to enhance her abilities with. This was a tremendous investment unto itself, but the broodmother was just like war itself; she devoured gold with an unending appetite. He would need more than a thousand mana crystals to create a drone with magic abilities, but right now he didn't have that kind of money. He needed a way to strengthen her own level as well as her production.

The 100 mana crystals had allowed her to increase her daily output of knights to four. She could also create eight humanoid warriors, nine throwers, or eleven wind wolves as well. Of course, all this couldn't be done together.

Richard gathered all the knights the broodmother had created during the wait, planning to rely on his current numbers to plough through the enemies. However, the troops under Earl Layton and Countess Katrina didn't quite agree with his authority in battle, so he only retained the thousand best men. The general leading this army, Lady Anna, was someone who left Richard with a bit of a headache. The woman was beautiful and arrogant, her level 14 strength giving her a boundless confidence that ensured she didn't so much as spare a second glance at others. Worried she might not follow his instructions in the coming battles, he had to reduce the number of troops from her to a minimum. Thankfully, she wasn't here to participate in the project but to keep an eye on Viscount Zim; she had no objections to this arrangement.

Their first stop was Camp Kvensen. This was the base of the various non-human tribes in the Bloodstained Lands, similar to a capital in a human kingdom. This camp that occupied somewhere around a dozen square kilometres held tauren, orcs, ogres, goblins, grey dwarves, evil dwarves, large monsters, cavemen, and even

goblins and the nari people amongst dozens more races. There were a hundred tribes here, each with their own interests. Some tribes even had blood feuds with each other, so there were duels, battles, and massacres every day. The place was thus also a gathering point for non-human bandits. If all the warriors here were pulled out, they would quickly turn into a formidable army.

Camp Kvensen was the natural enemy of human slavers. Any merchant group passing nearby would be turned into food for these tribes who would band together to kill them off. The goods of human caravans had immense value, while humans themselves were delicacies to many of the tribes present. Thus, outside of first-class caravans with over a thousand guards, no humans dared to approach Kvensen. They would rather take a detour of more than a hundred kilometres than be eyed by the beings here.

Of course, the vanguard of Richard's army headed straight for the camp. The various races of Kvensen came out at full strength, creating a huge army of over 40,000; this was basically every able adult in the camp. Here, they began a decisive battle against Richard's troops at the Gravel Desert that was ten kilometres away from the camp.

This was a direct battle with nothing fancy. An organised formation of 15,000 human soldiers supported by overqualified clerics and mages fought fiercely against a mob of 40,000 scattered tribal warriors. It truly tested Richard's ability in head-to-head battles; there were no schemes here, no trick to surviving except drawing the lifeblood of the enemy. Powerhouses were suppressed to the limit in this expansive battlefield, turned into the smallest components of an enormous alchemic machine that behaved like a robot. They blocked, brandished their weapons, blocked once more, brandished their weapons once more... Time flowed like blood as these men fought until they were cut down by an enemy.

With the passage of time, the army's discipline, equipment, and spellcasters finally began to shine through. The enemy morale

rapidly faded away as the number of dead increased, while Richard imitated Sinclair's tactics in mixing his knights up with heavy cavalry to create small teams that broke apart any resistance. These men constantly created cracks in the enemy formation, allowing Richard's infantry to fill the gaps. The spellcasters' focus was incomparably spectacular, dozens of fireballs flying through the sky to tear open spaces in the tribal army.

The first battle ended with Richard's victory. The tribal warriors left behind nearly 10,000 bodies as they retreated in panic to the camp.

The second battle occurred at Sweetwater Valley, five kilometres away from Kvensen. Now there were elderly and children amongst the tribal warriors, many fighters only barely able to pick up weapons. 35,000 men took on Richard's army of 13,000, suffering a crushing defeat in under three hours. Richard's knights pursued the broken army, dying Sweetwater Valley red with blood.

The third engagement was no longer a war, but a massacre. Richard encircled half of Camp Kvensen, obtaining the upper hand and burning it down with blazing fire. He also chased anyone still hidden in the camp out into the open wilderness. The huge fires blazed for an entire day, taking thousands of lives.

When watching the fire, Richard and the nobles who followed him on the campaign felt no sympathy. Buried under the soil of Camp Kvensen were more than 10,000 human skeletons. Here, humans were like livestock that only served as a source of wealth and food.

## Book 3, Chapter 112 - Exploration

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Richard's men pursued the fleeing enemies from Kvensen for a dozen days, wiping them out completely. This way, the greatest threat on the path to the Ashen Plateau was completely exterminated. The battle with Camp Kvensen had resulted in nearly 5,000 losses on his side, but the damage to the tribes was several times that number.

There were still 200 kilometres or so left on the path to the Ashen Plateau in the northwest, but there were no powerful organisations left. The next strategic location was the ruins of Zhubvar, the capital of the former troll empire. Legend had it that the river streams around Zhubvar slowly dried out over time, turning the vast forest that covered this place into a barren land. The troll empire fell into decline, eventually dying out. There were still a few small troll tribes within the ruins, but even if their exceptional vitality made them natural nemeses of humans a single tribe only had a hundred inhabitants at most. There was no need for Richard to use his entire army to defeat them, just a few of the drones would be enough.

The ruins weren't said to hold any valuable treasures. The trolls were a race that preferred wood and stone, their ability to process metal very primitive. Most troll encampments had nothing of value for humans.

However, Richard was not here for wealth. He wanted to gather all sorts of offerings.

Mountain ranges dotted the western Bloodstained Lands, the terrain fickle and complicated. There were few human settlements here, most groups who moved about being powerful slavers. The land was rather barren, so there weren't any specialty products that made the risk of travelling all this way worth it. Only the dwarven countries in the northwest were worthy of trade, but the existence of Camp Kvensen had restricted large-scale movements

in the area. It was nearly impossible to pass through this land alive with heavy ores in hand. The returns of such an attempt weren't worth the risks, so few were willing to step foot in this place.

However, Richard's eradication of Kvensen changed everything. Most of the precious minerals from the dwarven lands could now be transported back by human armies, and the volumes would be enough for the profit to be counted in tens of millions. The remaining races in the Bloodstained Lands, be they orcs, ogres, or trolls, weren't so foolish as to challenge a huge army with 10,000 people.

Richard had his troops set up camp at the edge of the former troll empire, allowing the noble generals under him to reorganise their troops and recuperate. On the other hand, he brought along his own followers and several hundred of the broodmother's troops to search through the ruins of Zhubvar.

Small hills were everywhere within the troll lands, giant wilted trees towering into the sky with cracked rocks and dry soil on the surface of the ground. Richard passed through the dead forest and walked two whole days without seeing many signs of life outside of the occasional few vultures.

From the second day onwards, they started to notice stone carvings half-buried in the ground, as well as wooden totems and rocky alleys covered by weeds. They had officially entered the troll lands.

It was sometime around noon. Richard was at the edge of a cliff, carefully moving his upper half to peer down into the depths below. This valley was several hundred metres deep, thorn-like stone pillars towering out of the darkness. Around the stone pillars were rather smooth rocks, while the bottom of the cliff was clearly weathered away. A long time ago, this place was once the valley of a torrential river; now, however, it had been dried up for many years. One could only see a few short shrubs growing in the shadows at the foot of the valley.

The two walls of the valley were separated by dozens of metres. Wind howled at the mouth, creating terrifying sharp whistles. Far into the distance on the other side, one could see a lush area; the forests there still had some life. The snaking valley was blocking his path, so long he couldn't see to its ends. It was unknown how long a detour would take.

A short distance away were two bulky rectangular pillars with obvious signs of erosion on them. At the top were the carvings of a beast with long teeth, clearly in the style of the trolls. Opposite the cliff were two other pillars that were similar, although one was broken in half. It seemed like there had been a rope bridge over this valley a long time ago, but time had worn away the ropes.

“Rope,” Richard called out after another look around the cliff walls. A moment later, a few free Archeron soldiers dragged over a thick rope that was several hundred metres long. Richard had made ample preparations for this expedition, bringing over all the Archerons present. They might not have great individual abilities, but each possessed plentiful experience in battle and expeditions. They were prime candidates for ruin exploration.

A few large bats flew down from the sky with a thought, biting at an end of the rope and flying to the other side of the valley. The rope was pulled farther and farther until it finally crossed the other cliff, after which a surprising scene occurred. The bats actually managed to fly in loops to wind the rope around the stone pillar, even adding a tight knot! The free Archeron soldiers who had never seen any such thing before were stunned at the sight. Who would have thought that bats could tie knots too?

With the first rope past the cliff, the next bit was easy. Rolf, whose forte was agility, took another rope and bounded across to tie the second rope for the bridge. The first knot was fixed as well, and freshly-cut wooden boards were affixed to the bridge. After an hour's time, a rope bridge connected the two ends. Richard was the first to cross it on his unicorn, followed by the knights and

humanoid warriors.

Once they crossed the river valley, they spent an entire afternoon passing through a mountain range until they found more greenery under their feet. The air was finally starting to hold some moisture, so Richard found some level ground for with a clear view where they could set up camp and rest. One could already see a sparse forest further ahead, with the occasional cries of some ferocious beasts ringing in the distance. The troops had been fatigued by the day's trek, so it would not be a good decision to continue through the night.

Some enormous bonfires were set up in the camp, large enough to drive away any nearby wild beasts. Sentinels spread out in twos and threes, vigilantly watching the hills throughout the night. Half of Richard's ten or so elite bats were flying out into the mountains to scout the areas they would pass through the next day, while the other half were resting in the camp. However, there was always one bat circling the camp.

In the central tent, Richard was using a magic chest as his worktable as he quickly drew something on magic paper. His pen moved quickly, tracing a map of the mountain range that slowly grew more and more detailed. He was drawing what his elite bats were seeing on the magic paper; a formation had already been inscribed that would turn this paper into a holographic map.

The elite bats could patrol a range of thirty kilometres. Richard was already seeing a few things that gathered his interest on the map, so soon after he was done drawing it he poured his mana into the formation and activated the hologram.

Damaged buildings could be seen at the edge of the map. While only a few broken walls remained, one could see that the entire region had been set up in a neat square formation. The trolls loved squares and rectangles. These ruins were at the bottom of a gentle hill. At one side was a long, even grand flight of steps that headed towards the edge of the map.

Richard examined the map for a while before patting Flowsand who was beside him, “Take a look. This should be Zhubvar.”

Flowsand pressed close to him, having a close look before nodding, “While it’s just a small part, it does seem to be the style of the trolls. Looking at these steps, there could be an enormous city that can fit tens of thousands at the end. That should be the capital of the troll empire. Look at the sides of the steps, that should be where the guards were stationed... Hmm? Why isn’t there anything at the end?”

“The bats could only fly so far.”

Flowsand nodded, “We need to be careful tomorrow, it’s possible a fair number of trolls are still around. I suspect that there are a few wells or the like near the capital. Have you planned our route yet?”

“Yes, I thought it through. Look here, if we walk along this path we’ll be pretty safe. There isn’t any place we can be ambushed—”

“Take care of that yourself, don’t bother me! I’m busy!” Flowsand rubbed her head against Richard’s, grabbing a cushion before she continued to flip through the Book of Time. Letters and pictures kept appearing on the empty page, which she would read and then change with her divine power.

“What are you looking at?” Richard asked nonchalantly, stowing the map away.

“I’m learning the history and language of the troll civilisation,” she responded without looking up.

Richard was shocked, “You mean these trolls are the same as the ones in Norland?”

“The characteristics are about the same, but their history and culture are worlds apart. I’m obviously looking at information on the trolls of Faelor.”

“The Book of Time also has information on Faelor?” Richard was



starting to grow more and more interested in the tome in  
Flowsand's hands.

## Book 3, Chapter 113 - Exploration(2)

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Flowsand waved the Book of Time around, “Of course you can! Once you set up a Lighthouse of Time, the old dragon can extract fragments of a plane’s past in exchange for divine grace, putting it in the book. That’s what I’m looking at right now. It isn’t just the history of Zhubvar, but also the script of the troll civilisation.”

“This... This information also requires a payment of divine grace?” The look on Richard’s face grew slightly strange. The Eternal Dragon seemed capable of using anything at all to make a profit.

“Of course. Understanding a plane’s history is very important if you wish to conquer it. It helps greatly in the first stage of conquering the plane, integrating into it and establishing a foundation. This information is more important than a few rune knights.”

Her words were irrefutable, but Richard couldn’t bring himself to share the opinion. A plane like Faelor had an incomparably long history that spanned hundreds of thousands of years. Innumerable civilisations had come and gone since then, a place like Zhubvar but a tiny speck in the grand scheme of things. If it all required divine grace... The total amount of divine grace needed to learn the entire history of the plane would far exceed his wildest imagination.

He was starting to feel more and more like the blessings of the Eternal Dragon were simply omnipotent. In battles between two equal sides, the one with divine blessings would trump the other easily.

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The group continued its journey the next morning, spending another day trekking before they finally reached the boundaries of Zhubvar at dusk. Only seeing it for himself did Richard feel awed

by the vast capital of the trolls.

An enormous staircase was dug out from the side of the hill, every step a giant block of stone that was nearly a metre tall and an astounding fifty metres wide. There were stone platforms on each side, decorated with carvings of flames, suns, and giant beasts. There was also the occasional stone brazier, but the elements had weathered away all the carvings on those. The entire capital of the trolls was built atop the hill; the slope levelling out after a certain distance to become flat, inhabitable land. There were as many as thirty stone platforms until it reached that level.

At the end of the staircase was a pyramid-shaped sacrificial platform that neared seventy metres in height. Even looking up from the foot of the hill, one could still sense the magnificence and dignity of the place. Nobody knew just how long the trolls had taken to build this miraculous city.

Richard narrowed his eyes. Gazing into the distance, the layout of the troll capital seemed comparable to a gigantic altar. A thin mist filled the entire ruins, desolate cries faintly echoing everywhere. One could feel the increased humidity the moment they stepped foot into Zhubvar; just as Flowsand had expected, there were likely new sources of water here. However, there was also a marshy smell of decay in the air. With his sharp senses, Richard also smelt the stench of corpses.

He waved his hands and all the knights dismounted from their horses, growing more guarded. Giving the nameless elven sword to an elite humanoid, he drew Extinction and walked to the barracks on either side at the foot of the stairway. The roofs had caved in long ago, vines wrapping around the stone pillars. The troll rooms were of simple design; all the wooden wares had long since rotted away, leaving only the stone fire pits intact. A few metallic spear-tips were strewn around the barracks, long since rusted beyond imagination. Richard picked one up to take a look, but the tip actually broke apart in his hands. There seemed to be no

redeeming quality about it, from the material to the forging technique.

He shook his head, continuing around the barracks. Walking to another broken section of wall, he suddenly felt a faint rotting odour and stopped to look in that direction. Under a brick on the wall was a strange dark-grey moss, the surface seeming like the thick white fur of a rotting corpse.

Some information from his time in the Deepblue surged to his mind, but he couldn't be quite sure. "Zendrall!" he shouted, "Come take a look at this!"

The necromancer walked over and took a close look at the moss, saying with surety, "This is graveyard moss. They only grow in places where there is a dense concentration of souls, mostly graveyards where the undead are active."

"Ghosts are active here?" Richard turned solemn. If a large number of undead beings appeared in this place, there was a high possibility of powerful ghosts appearing. There was even a chance of liches and the like that had the potential to become legendary beings.

Zendrall carefully examined the graveyard moss again, "The undead have definitely passed by here, and it hasn't been a long time since. I can sense the aura of spirits."

Richard nodded, "Then we need to be careful. Summon two warriors of darkness just in case, we might need to use them to check some places."

The necromancer nodded and headed outside, beginning to summon his warriors of darkness. The past few battles had greatly expanded the number of undead under his control; now, he had 200 or so warriors and three death knights. He could even control up to fifteen at a time.

The fact that undead were active in the troll capital caused

Richard to raise his guard, but he felt no fear. His army had a large number of clerics.

Flowsand found a stone tablet at a corner of the barracks. Once the moss growing on it was wiped away, it revealed that the letters were still clear and legible. She didn't translate it right away, instead taking out a blank scroll to inscribe the words onto. Richard stood behind her, looking at the tablet as well. While he had studied the ancient troll language with her last night, it had been for too short a time. He could only vaguely make out a few words relating to sacrifices.

“What does it say?” he asked.

The scroll in Flowsand's hands shot a beam of light towards the stone tablet, copying all of the text onto itself in a moment. Flowsand took a look, “This is a scripture that details how to offer sacrifices to someone named Zuka, but the tablet only has the first steps. Hmm... this Zuka seems like a holy spirit that the trolls worshipped.”

Richard nodded, “We found traces of active undead nearby. Be careful.”

Flowsand thought nothing of it, patting her pocket with a smile, “There's twenty divine scrolls here.”

They quickly searched through the ruins of the two barracks, finding nothing of value outside of the stone tablet. Richard had his troops enter formation, leaving a small group of guards before heading further into Zhubvar's depths. However, just as they got to the steps his unicorn suddenly halted, uneasily pawing at the ground with a hoof while neighing in a low voice.

Richard was amazed at the sight. This was the first time the silver unicorn was behaving any differently from a normal horse, so much so that he was starting to doubt its uses. The unicorn had used twice the divinity of Phaser to make, and even at level 10 Phaser was a force to reckon with.

Within his mind, he felt impatience and frustration. The unicorn was getting increasingly violent, radiating animosity towards something hidden deep within the capital of the trolls. It was becoming more and more restless, the tip of its inch-long horn beginning to spark. The neighs grew louder and louder; Zendrall's expression changed as he felt a bout of dizziness, causing him to distance himself in shock. The power of death gathered around the two warriors of darkness that had just been summoned, but a pale silver fire burnt them until they started to cry out.

Richard quickly placed his hand on the unicorn's back to calm it, only getting it to quiet down after a lot of effort. However, with this he found out that the unicorn was a natural nemesis of the undead.

“Boss!” Gangdor suddenly shouted, “There seems to be something in the city. Look there!”

Following Gangdor's finger, Richard was just in time to see a dark silhouette flash between two buildings. However, he was too far away to see what exactly it was. Listening attentively, he caught faint whistling echoing through the ruins that was growing more concentrated.

He turned back towards his men, “All dismount! Be on guard!”

This time, even the drone knights dismounted. They could only display level 8 strength when not on their horses; it was their connection to their mounts that allowed them to be so powerful. However, in mountainous terrain like Zhubvar's the mounts were of no use.

Although there was unknown activity in the ruins, Richard was not flustered. He instead summoned all the elite bats in his mind, having them soar into the sky. With them circling overhead, he immediately felt much safer. The entire troop then moved up the stairs, continuing to explore the troll capital.

There wasn't much outside of a few more stone tablets in the

lower regions of the city. The buildings here were crude and simple, records stating that it was for weaker peasants to reside in. The troll empire followed a strict hierarchy; there was a strict division in society based on power and role. The most obvious indication of this was the stairway itself.

## Book 3, Chapter 114 - Sacred Spirit

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A little further up were the middle-regions of Zhubvar, where the warriors and hunters often lived. There were a handful of shrines and plazas here outside of basic shelter, and the stone road was much wider as well. At the edge of this district lay a stone canal to channel water, but it was already dried out.

Richard wandered aimlessly into one of the shrines. It wasn't particularly large, but the height was nothing to scoff at. The remnants of what seemed to be a statue of Zuka lay at the middle of the altar, seemingly destroyed on purpose. The two side walls contained carvings of the teachings of Zuka, as well as some pictures of battle. Most of the paint was scraped off due to its age, but the content was still visible. Richard quietly studied these murals as Flowsand busied herself with copying the scriptures.

One of the murals depicted a giant feathered serpent, coiled around an altar receiving endless sacrifices from the trolls. That was Zuka, the sacred spirit of the troll empire. Another mural showed Zuka fighting a bear of equal size, as well as a huge spider. Beneath them were three clashing factions of trolls, a mixture of blood and flesh. Richard could tell that even though the techniques were rather primitive, the proportions of these depictions were extremely precise. The troll warriors looked like ants compared to the three sacred spirits.

A matured troll could grow up to 2.5 metres tall on average, while the stronger ones were more than three metres tall. If one went by the ratio in the murals, the sacred spirits were at least a hundred metres tall!

Even as he was observing these carvings, he felt a sudden sense of alarm. He turned his head abruptly, just in time to see a troll rush out from behind the altar and throw itself at Flowsand noiselessly!

The troll was extremely robust, over 2.5 metres tall with a blood-



red mane and two menacing fangs. Its agility belied its enormous body, the sudden attack too quick for even Richard to react to.

It grabbed towards the seated Flowsand's nape, but just as its four-fingered hand touched her the Waterdrop Necklace released a shot of blazing light that blinded it. The troll screamed in pain and quickly shielded its eyes, while Flowsand took the chance to get up on her feet. She stepped on the troll's toe before slamming the thick Book of Time onto its waist, causing the disoriented creature to lose balance. It retreated a few steps, but Flowsand stomped down on its leg; the sound of bones breaking rang through the shrine.

The troll cried out in excruciating pain, its back striking the wall of the shrine causing the entire building to quake. It rubbed its eyes forcefully, finally regaining its sight before growling towards Flowsand with bloodshot eyes. However, the shrine still continued to vibrate. Tiramisu had charged into the opponent head-first before anyone could react!

Ogres were stronger than trolls by nature. Moreover, Tiramisu was level 13 compared to what seemed to be level 10; the troll flew out upon contact, smashing into the wall before falling to the ground. It struggled to pick itself up, but Tiramisu charged forward once more and stomped hard on its back. Bone-cracking sounds rang out once more as the creature was disabled, never to stand again, but it still growled and tried to prop itself up on both arms. Such was the valiance of trollkind.

Richard cast a detection spell, looking into the troll's bloodshot eyes before finally shaking his head, "It doesn't have any intelligence, we won't be able to get anything out of it. Kill away!"

Tiramisu squatted down the moment Richard's last words sounded, ramming a fist into the back of the troll's head. The ogre's terrifying strength completely shattered the troll's skull.

Richard wasn't exactly surprised at Tiramisu's violent outburst.

Ogres and trolls actually shared common ancestry, one succeeding enormous strength while the other inherited unyielding vitality. However, this relationship only served to become the source of a blood feud. Both races believed strongly that they could devour the other to gain their power, so the result of a meeting was always a battle to the death. The trolls wished to wipe out the ogres and vice versa.

On the verge of growing a second head, Tiramisu was basically ogre nobility. He certainly didn't believe that eating a troll would give him the powers of one, but a hatred established at birth just couldn't be ended so easily.

Flowsand sent a stream of divine flames out from her fingers, pouring down on the troll corpse. Sparks of pale green light formed near the creature's head, glinting for a moment before scattering into the sky. She turned to Richard, "There are traces of divinity on the troll. Seems like you're right, we might be able to find something that can serve as an offering."

Richard glanced at the troll before taking a look at the mural on the wall, "We have to be careful, that Zuka might still be alive."

Flowsand patted the Book of Time, "The sacred spirits who accepted sacrifices are mostly souls now. If not for that, the troll empire wouldn't have disappeared so easily. I actually have a plan to kill such things, your unicorn will come in handy."

Even as the two were talking, the sounds of fighting suddenly rang out outside. Richard immediately rushed out of the shrine, just in time to see Io covered in a divine aura as he backflipped an enormous troll to the ground with ease. The battle priest then waved the sceptre in his hands, smashing the troll's skull into pieces.

Upon seeing Richard, Io waved at him and laughed cheerily, "Isn't it easy for a level 14 battle priest to take out a mere level 10 troll?"

The troll truly was level 10, but given the innate strength and vitality of the race they could cause trouble even for level 12 warriors. Even a high priest couldn't easily take out such an opponent at close range as Io had. Richard also caught onto another thing, level 14. It seemed like even though the fellow had been slower than he claimed, he had finally advanced. He had jumped two levels in the past few months, leaving Richard quite surprised. Was this fellow special to the Eternal Dragon or something?

Richard's gaze turned gloomy, but the blood in his veins started to burn. If there was a need, he wouldn't be afraid of fighting Io fiercely again even if he reached level 16, forget now.

In front of Richard's eyes, Io took large strides to a warhorse that was carrying luggage and opened a magic chest on its back. Richard had never seen this chest open before, and was quite astonished when the battle priest took out a set of extravagant pale gold armour. He changed out his priest robes for the armour set before giving his sceptre a twist, causing the thick tip to separate into three segments and fall down. Each segment was connected to the handle by a silver chain; in the blink of an eye, the sceptre had turned into a delicate-yet-overbearing three-headed flail.

The battle priest stood there like a god of war, radiating blinding light. The glow of magic from the armour and sceptre indicated they were both epic-level equipment, easily worthy of being the most prized possession of a Faelor saint.

Richard's eyes narrowed, but he didn't bat an eyelid during his response, "Who knew even a battle priest could wear such heavy armour."

Io didn't bother hiding his arrogance, "This is the power of a level 14 battle priest. Outside of plate armour and tower shields, I can use any sort of equipment without it affecting my power. How's that for you, level 12 mage? When are you going to be able to use grade 7 spells?"

Richard felt the elven bloodline within him. After such a long period of nurture, the astral trunk had already grown a third branch with the tip showing traces of a new root. Once this soft shoot grew into a leaf, it would give him another ability. He smiled indifferently, “There’s no hurry.”

This time, Io’s expression changed. He looked at Richard, not knowing what he was thinking.

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There were active trolls in Zhubvar, and a large quantity of them at that. When they stepped into the 22nd district of the city, Richard and his team encountered an increased number of attacks. These trolls were born hunters; with the cover of the buildings and the terrain, they could only be discovered when a few metres away. If not for the elite bats flying erratically through the sky, Richard’s troop would have suffered casualties.

The buildings in the upper levels of the city were taller and more spread-out, the water canal wider as well. In between these buildings were trees, meadows, and reservoirs, with intricate bestial carvings on the remaining infrastructure. One could imagine the grandeur of the trolls in the peak of their glory would be enough to leave people breathless. The number of shrines was increasing the further they went as well, with various statues of Zuka and other sacred spirits. The shrines of the other spirits were significantly smaller than Zuka’s, built around Zuka’s shrines as well. They seemed to subordinates of the feathered serpent.

However, all of Zuka’s statues seemed to be intentionally destroyed by someone. All Richard could find was piles of messy stone fragments that barely related to the past. The sculptures in the affiliated shrines were undamaged, but with the passage of time all divinity had faded away. Statues without divinity were just blocks of stone, their only value being in art and history.

## Book 3, Chapter 115 - Troll Camp

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Despite being destroyed, the Zuka statues had absorbed so much faith during the trolls' reign that they still had a lot of divinity remaining. However, Flowsand's tests revealed a hazy grey aura covering the statue fragments, implying powerful curses had tainted this divine power. The statues could no longer be used as offerings, but that didn't mean the broodmother wouldn't be interested in them.

Richard's army split up when exploring the upper regions, every follower leading a small group of soldiers and five throwers as they enacted a purge on the trolls hidden in the area. Under the guidance of the elite bats, a dozen troll hunters were killed within a few minutes. A miserable whistle rang out from the upper sections of the city, and a few dozen more jumped out of hiding and fled further up.

Three of the elite bats were mobilised with a thought, flying in the direction of the whistle. However, one of the trolls suddenly appeared in their line of sight. Hidden behind a broken piece of wall with a javelin in hand, the creature was staring at the bats with bloodshot eyes. Richard was startled, immediately calling for the bats to dodge, but the javelin quickly sped towards one of them. The world went dark for a moment as his connection to it was severed.

Richard trembled. Gazing into the distance, he saw six or seven more javelins fly into the sky and strike his bats like lightning, travelling dozens of metres more before falling away. The power of these hunters' projectiles was immense, able to penetrate through even direbears. In terms of strength alone, they were far superior to the throwers.

Although he was shocked, he immediately had the rest of his elite bats soar at least a hundred metres into the sky; at this distance, even these powerful javelin throws couldn't hit their marks. He

then looked towards the peak of the hill, muttering to himself. He currently stood where the troll nobility used to live, and above were the regions meant for the chieftain and shamans followed by the shrine and altar at the very top. The whistling had come from the chieftain's residence, and all the trolls had retreated to that point as well. They seemed to intentionally avoid the altar and shrine.

Richard had assumed every troll active in these ruins was like the few he had killed, only left with instinct and no intellect. However, the commander was obviously still sane, and the hunters that had ambushed his bat showed astute observation skills as well. Very few could tell that his elite bats weren't natural creatures. Strange vultures always circled the ruins of Zhubvar, but these hunters had only attacked his bats; they had clearly noticed something.

Since the one in command was intelligent, Richard could no longer afford to treat these trolls like random beasts. A string of orders started flowing out of his mouth, two flanks splitting off while the central group charged straight for the chieftain's lands under his leadership.

The chieftain's territory was quite expansive, but there were few buildings in the area. Still, each one was incredibly tall; charging into one, Richard found dozens of trolls panicking as they escaped into the forest a few hundred metres away. One could see a trail within the dense forest that snaked into its depths.

"What do we do now, Master?" Olar asked.

How could he let these trolls escape now? Richard waved his hand with a shout, "We pursue!"

Before charging into the forest, he cast a myriad of defensive spells on himself. The troll hunters were like fish in water in the forest, but the environment posed no hindrance to his own army. Waterflower, Gangdor, and Tiramisu were all adept at forest battles, so they easily managed to follow the trolls' route a few

kilometres to a camp in a little valley.

Just as they entered a clearing, a javelin flew towards Richard's face. He turned and dodged out of its path, magical light flickering around him as a long-range barrier deflected the projectile. Although a low-level spell, this barrier could bounce a normal arrow away instantly. However, the javelin's path only changed slightly.

The javelin that brushed past Richard pierced deep into a nearby tree, a loud thud ringing out as it practically shot through the trunk that one could barely reach their arms around. The figure of a troll flashed a few dozen metres away, disappearing into the camp. Another emerged elsewhere in a matter of seconds, mercilessly throwing two more javelins out. Mournful started ringing out one after the other as the trolls weaved in and out, pouncing towards Richard's army from all directions.

The camp was built around a small ruin with an unknown purpose. Trolls kept running out of the camp to join the fight; half of them had red hair on their heads, acting with little intelligence to speak of, while the hair of the other half was more brownish. These ones were taller and stronger than their peers, with intricate ornaments on their body and a semblance of intelligence that the rest lacked.

Despite being besieged on all sides in unknown terrain, Richard wasn't flustered at all. He roughly gauged a location and launched a fireball with a wave of his hand, inducing numerous cries as the enemies rushed out with magic flames surging all around their bodies.

However, Richard knew a fireball without enhancements wouldn't seriously hurt level 10 trolls. He sent out an order in his mind, a sharp whistle ringing through the forest as a volley of axes killed all the trolls that had exposed themselves.

The humanoids and throwers entered melees all through the

forest, while Gangdor and Tiramisu turned into meat grinders that no ordinary troll could survive. Olar began his warsong, making each and every humanoid more ferocious; as he had grown in level, the boost provided by his singing had risen correspondingly. The bard could now boost the morale of his men, increasing their strength by 10%. Although bards didn't have as much power as divine or even magic spells, they made up for that with sheer area of effect. Olar's warsong could cover dozens of metres all around him.

The humanoids' excellent equipment far outshone that of the trolls, who used a mix of wood, bone, and primitive metal. With the stacked buffs from the warsong as well as all the spells cast on them, these soldiers didn't lose to the trolls even in vitality. The individual drones weren't harmed much at all during the course of the fight, the trolls instead suffering severe casualties. It wasn't long after the battle began before warriors of darkness entered the fray, the elite undead not knowing fear or death. Even the dauntless trolls shuddered at the sight.

Richard's silhouette appeared in one side of the forest, a thin book flashing as six direbears immediately appeared in front of him. These magical summons roared and charged into the troll camp a few metres away, but a few javelins nearly pierced through four of them. With only two making it all the way, they couldn't cause much damage before two three-metre-tall trolls charged out and shoved spears into their mouths. The bears struggled for a short while, but they eventually turned into mana that dissipated into the air.

Seeing this, Richard couldn't help but frown. Trolls were natural hunters, and their power in fighting wild beasts was matchless. The two large trolls were nearly level 13 each, and had been smart enough to target his summons' vital spots right away.

Still, this didn't make him anxious. He first launched a fireball to reveal two hidden high-level trolls, burning them and shrinking



back against a tree to dodge the javelins thrown over from the camp. This time he waved both hands with a chant, and ten boars suddenly appeared in the forest.

This was a grade 4 Nature's Beckon, a spell that took very little out of him. The ten boars began their assault on the troll camp, but they too were taken out by javelins. Richard smiled, bringing out another ten with a wave of his hands. These hunters needed to use the same number of javelins be it for the bears or the boars, and he could tell there were only a dozen or so guards left with four or five javelins each. He could cast over ten grade 4 Nature's Beckon spells!

By the time the third wave was exterminated, one of the boars had actually managed to make it into the troll camp; it was obvious that the hunters were out of javelins. On the other hand, Richard had cast four fireballs at the camp between the second and third waves to force the guards out of hiding. Waves of fire ploughed through the camp over and over, the trolls' shrieks growing increasingly dull.

Two troll warriors that had been grievously injured could endure no longer, charging out of the camp. One of them was a berserker nearly three-metres tall, but halfway through a slowing spell greatly reduced their speed. A wave of axes flew out from the throwers, killing both.

With the cover of the forest and the throwers, Richard used a combination of low-ranked spells to wear down the trolls in the camp. At this rate, everyone within would die. The situation elsewhere in the forest was also quite stable; the strongest enemy was a level 13 berserker, but it was not a match for those like Gangdor, Waterflower, and Rolf. The former two could even kill level 13 enemies with one blow if they used their rune sets.

When Richard summoned another ten boars to probe the opponent, the trolls in the camp finally broke. They all darted out, less than ten of them left most of whom were powerful berserkers.

However, they were crowded around an old troll that looked quite skinny and wise. The man wore a large wooden mask, his body smeared with bright splashes of colour. His head, shoulders, and wrists were all ornamented by beautiful feathers.

## Book 3, Chapter 116 - History and Prophecy

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The old troll began a chant the moment he left the camp, waving his arms to shroud Richard's boars with an acidic fog. The ten boars shrieked, half of them fading into mana particles in an instant. The rest managed to charge up to the trolls, but they were cut down immediately.

This troll shaman left Richard rather surprised. Even when the troll empire was at its peak, those able to cast grade 6 spells were quite highly ranked. Still, since the shaman was exposing himself he wouldn't be given the chance to cast any more spells.

Richard fired back with an acid fog of his own, enveloping all the remaining enemy trolls. The same spell covered twice the area of his opponent's, the corrosion 50% faster. The troll berserkers had the tenacity to survive a long time in the mist, but it was not the same for the shaman. He let out a pained scream as the fog burnt his entire body, unable to complete his next spell.

But things didn't end there. Just as the first spell faded and the shaman was about to start his chants once more, a fireball flew his way. Once the waves of heat passed, he managed to get through half his spell before he couldn't utter another word; Richard had cast two silencing spells in succession, and while the first had failed the second did not. Then came another acid fog spell covering them all.

The shaman ended up being incapacitated by Phaser, unable to cast even one more spell during the course of the battle. Richard's army had captured around twenty trolls alive and killed thrice that number, but only three humanoid warriors and a thrower had died in battle.

Richard personally looked through the camp once. The architecture was quite similar to the barracks in Zhubvar, albeit much cruder. The camp was built with huge rock walls, a rare few

of the stone houses actually having roofs. It seemed like only the shaman and high-ranking berserkers had their own residences, with the dumb red-headed ones sleeping outside in the courtyard.

Inside the central house was an exquisite rhinoceros statue with a sliver of divinity about it. In front was a stone basin filled with charcoal, still burning with a mysterious blue flame. At the bottom was a thick layer of sticky crimson fluid, likely the blood of some creature. It seemed like these trolls had found a new sacred spirit.

A wooden mask was hung on the wall, with unknown herbs and beast bones on some shelves on another side. This was likely the shaman's residence. Richard was surprised to find a few stone slabs in the corner, inscribed in troll script. Some looked ancient while the others were rather new, one with a carving so fresh it had to be a product of the shaman they had just seen. The language of the slabs was quite simplistic; inspecting them all, Richard found that even he could read it.

The oldest slab held three paragraphs:

‘We escaped Zhubvar and arrived at Rest Valley. This place still has water and trees, I hope the forest can give us food.

‘Zuka does not answer our summons. The evil spirits keep tempting us, we need a new sacred spirit and water.

‘Most of the forest is dead, and our water is almost gone. We must kill all those tempted, they drink the same water as us.’

This heavy slab had been engraved a long time ago; the content may have been minimal, but Richard could fully understand the writer's despair. He moved on to the second slab:

‘We have found a new holy spirit, the strong Kum. The Rhinoceros God is willing to shield us, his will keeping the evil spirits away. Many clansmen are still being tempted.

‘Kum led us to a new spring. Now, there is no need to kill the weak children. Still, the old trolls must go.’

The next few slabs continued to recount the history of the trolls. After Kum became their sacred spirit, the crisis of extinction was averted. They found a source of water and the ability to resist the temptation of whatever these evil spirits were, albeit without much success.

One year, a river that had been dry for a long time suddenly filled up again. The entirety of Zhubvar was filled with vitality, the forest beginning to regrow as green covered the earth once more. A simple map was even carved onto one of the slabs, illustrating the River of Life.

Richard matched the simple diagram with the map in his own memories, finding that the source of this river was in the Ashen Plateau; it went through the entirety of Zhubvar before disappearing into the Bloodstained Lands. The river wasn't very large, but where it passed through was quite important.

The immediate next slab only mentioned one event. The royal family of Zhubvar, the Bloodtooth tribe, had finally succumbed to the temptation of the evil spirits. The entire family degenerated and went missing.

The newest slab had a single brief passage. This shaman of the Bloodpeak tribe wanted to retrieve the three sacred artefacts of Zhubvar, but none of the brave warriors that were sent to the ruins returned. The shaman found strange activity in the city, so he built an outpost near the ruins. He also built a shrine to Kum here so he could slowly encroach on Zhubvar with the sacred spirit's power.

Richard felt heartache as he read through all these slabs. This was a burden accumulated over a long time, millennia of history frozen into the few blocks of stone.

He shifted the slabs out of the shrine, preparing to show them to Flowsand. He also felt the need to speak to the shaman; the evil spirits mentioned were likely linked to the disappearance of the

royal family and the abnormalities all around the ruins. Recalling the slight aura of death permeating the troll capital, he felt slightly uneasy.

Within the courtyard, Flowsand was directing a few humanoids to dig out a stone tablet that was half-buried in the ground. This tablet was similar to the ones in Zhubvar's ruins, the only difference being the content carved atop it.

The troll prisoners were bound together in the middle of the camp, sitting under the watchful eye of the humanoids. Trollkind had powerful vitality; they could recuperate from any serious injury with time as long as there weren't any broken limbs or the like. Not far away, Richard's unicorn was uneasily turning in circles while occasionally pawing the ground. However, its magnificent yet delicate silver hooves could not break through the stone. Io was stood next to the beast, unceasingly petting its mane while casting divine spells in an attempt to pacify it. The creature ignored the berserkers and even the troll shaman, but it was glaring intensely at the regular trolls with no intelligence. If not for the battle priest forcing it back, it would long since have pounced over.

When Richard walked out of the residence, he frowned at the sight. He gave the unicorn a strict command in his mind, using the broodmother's link to force it to suppress its instincts and quiet down.

Io's eyes lit up at the sight of the slabs in Richard's hands, "Let me take a look. There should be some useful information in there."

Richard handed them to him, "These 'evil spirits' keep coming up here, whatever they are. On top of that, I keep sensing an aura of death in Zhubvar. Could the city have been taken over by a powerful undead?"

"That wouldn't be surprising. Cities like Zhubvar normally have enormous crypts; as long as enough time passes, departed spirits

will gather in the best-preserved bodies. The trolls have a unique method of storing their corpses, so they turn into undead more easily.”

“You know quite a bit,” Richard gave the battle priest a rare compliment.

“I was born this way.” Of course, Io did not know humility.

Richard then had the troll shaman brought into a room, preparing to interrogate him. Flowsand and Io were nearby, and a language comprehension spell ensured that communication wouldn't be a problem. He seated himself opposite the now-awake troll, “Esteemed shaman, I believe there are things for us to discuss. I'm very curious about what these evil spirits are, and what exactly happened within Zhubvar. If you wish for your kin to survive, you'd best tell me everything you know.”

The shaman looked at him, eyes slightly turbid and voice sounding like the roar of a wild beast, “You, are you trying to get Zhubvar's sacred artefacts?”

Richard laughed, “That depends. I don't know what these artefacts are at all; what is useful for you trolls might be trash to me. I'm interested in Zhubvar's history.”

The shaman stayed quiet for a bit, his gaze sweeping past the three present, “Plunderers from another world, why should I believe you?”

That statement shocked even Flowsand, while Richard froze up for a few moments, “How... How did you find out?”

The shaman sighed, “It is a secret passed down amongst the high-ranked shamans of Zuka. Before he left and Zhubvar was destroyed, the mighty Sacred Spirit left behind one final prophecy to pass down only through word of mouth. The prophecy said that thousands of years in the future, when the River of Life started flowing once more, plunderers from a foreign land would step foot

in Zhubvar. These paragons of destruction would come for the three sacred artefacts, but they would also be a ray of hope. The holy beast of the plunderers would be the end of the evil spirits, and Zhubvar would thus be resurrected.

“What the hell?” Even Flowsand couldn’t keep from swearing as she exchanged glances with Richard. Io seemed confused as well, turning to glance at the unicorn in the courtyard.



## Book 3, Chapter 117 - Sacred Artefacts

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A mere sacred spirit that couldn't even compare to a demigod accurately prophesied a planar invasion millennia in the future? Was Zuka beyond even the Eternal Dragon? Richard snorted, "What holy beast?"

The large troll pointed his finger at the unicorn in the yard, "Is that not a holy beast? It is extremely sensitive to my clansmen who have been tainted by the evil spirits. I observed it during the battle, any tainted troll who was touched by its horn died a fiery death; that creature cleansed their souls, liberating them from their torment."

Richard turned to look at the unicorn and then back to the large troll. Try as he might, he couldn't shake of a heavy feeling of unease rising in his heart. The unicorn was a special drone designed by a combination of the broodmother's divinity and Zim's bloodline, born only a short time ago. It was hard to believe that it was the holy beast of the prophecy; even though unicorns were mythical creatures that qualified to be holy beasts in many planes, he felt like this one was only a good imitation.

"Alright then. Let's move onto these evil spirits and sacred artefacts," he said impatiently.

This time, the large troll had an unexpectedly positive response. He did not know exactly what these evil spirits were, but ever since Zuka had fallen into a deep slumber they had taken over his shrine and altar. Anyone approaching the upper levels of Zhubvar would be influenced by them, several trolls never seen again after they entered the shrine. Even those powerful warriors with great willpower who did not enter the shrine were adversely affected, some losing their wisdom and turning into wild beasts that acted solely on instinct.

There were seven or eight large tribes around Zhubvar who had

survived, all under the protection of new sacred spirits. The two nearest to Zhubvar were protected by Kum, the rhinoceros Richard had seen in the small shrine in the camp. Whenever drought enveloped the surrounding regions, the only source of water was in the upper levels of Zhubvar. Any warrior that wished to enter the vicinity of Zhubvar to get the water had to rely on the new spirits' support, but those who made the trip enough times still lost their wisdom.

The shaman also told Richard how to deal with the evil spirits. One of the three sacred artefacts was the soul jar, placed deep within the royal crypt. Once it was acquired, one could enter the shrine and offer a sacrifice just like they would if they were summoning Zuka. Doing so would cause the evil spirits to descend, at which point one would have to give their life to trap the evil spirits in the jar. If Richard was willing to deal with the evil spirits, the shaman was willing to sacrifice his own soul to activate the jar.

Having heard this, Richard had someone take the shaman away before turning to look at Io and Flowsand, "What do the two of you think?"

Io shrugged, "Mr. Great Mage, if you have an idea just say it."

Richard wasn't angered by this, instead muttering to himself for a while before speaking up, "If the soul jar can really trap evil spirits, it could possibly be an offering itself."

"Possibly? It definitely is! Given the aura I sensed in Zhubvar... Once the evil spirits are trapped, it will definitely be an intermediate offering at minimum!"

Flowsand nodded in agreement, "Even in Norland, such an offering could start a war between two large groups of nobles."

Thinking back to the unprecedented list of possible blessings, Richard couldn't help but grow excited at the thought of an intermediate offering. Still, he forced himself to think and evaluate the risks, "The shaman mentioned that these spirits have

great power over one's mind. If we want to fight this, the only possible method is to have incredible willpower."

Io unexpected stretched out both hands and smiled radiantly, "Not a problem for me."

"I'm the same," Flowsand added.

Richard was left speechless. It seemed like he was the only one who would pose a problem.

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It didn't take much time for an agreement to be reached. Richard would deal with the evil spirits, but in exchange the shaman would obey him unconditionally and eventually give up his life to trap them.

The army returned to Zhubvar within an hour, with a few dozen trolls added on. Outside of the shaman were some of the berserkers as well as about ten of the trolls that had lost their minds. The shaman had mentioned that these infected creatures were key.

Guided by the shaman, Richard quickly crossed the chieftain's territory and arrived at the foot of the shrine. There was a passage nearby leading downwards, the end blocked by two large stone doors. This was the royal crypt, the location of the soul jar.

The crypt was truly magnificent. The doors were ten metres tall, with no way of telling how thick they were. The handles were engraved with the totem of life-like feathered serpents that made one feel like they were being watched. Richard felt a great power on the other side of these doors, slowly creeping out. He pushed hard, but the doors would not budge; they were too heavy even for someone like Tiramisu to open.

"Allow me," the troll shaman said hoarsely, walking up to the doors and indicating for two berserkers to pull over one of their deranged brethren. He unsheathed a bone dagger and stabbed it straight into the troll's heart, the ashen-white blade quickly being

stained crimson. The dagger started throbbing as though it had a life of its own, viciously sucking out all of the blood from the troll's heart. Despite its great tenacity the troll was left a shrivelled clump of flesh, as dry as a mummy. The dagger had turned a dark purple, looking like a leech that had just finished a good meal.

The shaman then placed the dagger in an unremarkable slot in the stone door, causing blood to immediately spread across the door's surface. The entire crypt started to shake as a few loose stones fell down above, the two heavy doors sliding open of their own accord.

The shaman turned around, "Only the blood of the degenerate traitors can open the doors of the crypt."

Richard nodded, but the moment he entered the graveyard his expression warped into a frown. Behind the doors was a spacious hall, a row of slabs propped up on each end. Every slab held a mummified troll corpse, while at their feet were dark grey jars.

"These are warriors that once protected the graveyard. Those jars contain the souls of these loyal warriors who have protected these sacred grounds for generations."

The aura of undeath here was extremely strong, the conditions making it likely for many of these trolls to turn into undead creatures. However, the corpses all seemed to be in pristine condition with no signs of conversion; these jars below likely held secrets of their own.

Still, the aura of undeath was far too strong for even the humanoids to endure. Flowsand and Io couldn't protect them all in such conditions either, so Richard wound up having to leave all his soldiers behind as he only brought his followers into the crypt.

The crypt was split up into three levels, with even the first two levels that housed more than 3,000 mummified trolls being extremely magnificent. The shaman mentioned that he had tried to retrieve the soul jar himself once, but was forced to turn back at

the end of the second level. The power of undeath that had accumulated over millennia had reached a shocking point; had he tried to enter the third level, he would have been turned into an undead creature. It was only because of Io and Flowsand that Richard's team could enter.

The moment they entered the third level, Richard quickly noticed that the jars of the mummified trolls here had been broken. "Be careful!" the shaman cried out in shock, "The royal guards have come alive!"

The mummies in the hall seemed to sense something. They slowly stood up, making their way to the door.

However, Richard did not panic. He started off with a few detection spells on these undead creatures, revealing that they were about level 13 or 14 each. It seemed like the royal guards were more skilled than the elite berserkers outside.

Still, the undead were a welcome enemy for a party with two powerful priests. Flowsand opened the Book of Time, and a dazzling ball of light made its way out to float atop her head. It constantly shot out faint gold rays, lighting up everything within twenty metres. Any undead creatures within this region were incinerated by divine fire. Some of the weaker creatures tried to avoid the light, while the more powerful ones tried to shield themselves as they made a dash towards the party. However, the light had severely weakened them; they weren't even level 10 anymore.

Richard brandished his staff, spawning several walls of fire to keep out the attackers. The walls were meticulously placed, exactly on the fringe of Flowsand's domain so the warriors that rushed into them would be hit by both at the same time. The thirty seconds of these walls was more than enough for the party to do a lot of damage; even if the undead trolls made their way past the walls, they would only be left with half their lives.

Richard was still unsatisfied. He took out the Book of Holding and cast a grade 6 Nature's Beckon, spawning six direbears just beyond the reach of the walls of fire. The undead that braved their way through the inferno were just swatted back by the bears' paws, forced to do battle within the blaze.

## Book 3, Chapter 118 - Sacred Artefacts(2)

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With the defensive perimeter established, it became a simple task to deal with the enemies. Richard renewed the walls of fire whenever they dissipated, using the spare time to send fireballs towards the undead trolls. Tiramisu was casting his own fireballs as well; they weren't as strong as Richard's, but he could easily cast twenty to thirty these grade 3 spells. Zendrall kept himself busy as well, casting control spells on the guard captains who were more powerful than the rest. Given his extreme focus, the necromancer succeeded with four out of five, sending each controlled enemy into the wall of fire to burn to death.

The unicorn had puffed out clouds of white smoke from its mouth the moment it saw the large group of undead, sending them towards the enemy. This white smoke flowed through the aura of undeath, completely eviscerating ten times its area of any traces of the power of death. All the air in a ten-metre radius had been purified in a flash, keeping all of Richard's followers safe. Only Zendrall remained hidden outside, avoiding the clouds completely.

The idle Io finally decided to act as well, stretching his hands and sending a ball of dazzling light flying towards the enemy. The ball had ten thin rays rotating around it, burning every undead creature it touched. Even the strongest of the enemies was hurt by these rays!

The steady stream of light arrows fell upon the undead trolls like rain, making them tremble. The ball quickly reached the other end of the room and exploded into a dazzling blaze, wiping out anyone nearby. The remaining trolls were left on the brink of death.

This was a grade 7 spell that Richard had never heard of, but it could even compare to grade 8. It was likely another one of those skills unique to battle priests. It had left a bulk of the people in the hall entirely silent, awestruck by Io's sheer power.

Richard's expression turned sour. This bastard hadn't been disciplined in a while, so now he was showing off.

Even though the combination of magic and the divine was burning through the enemies, there seemed to be no end in sight. The number of warriors in the crypt was far beyond anyone's expectations, undead still streaming out of the passages and heading in their direction. Once his followers had used up half of their energy reserves, Richard decided to retreat. The destroyed warriors would not come back, and their energy and mana could be built back up. Unless it was absolutely necessary, he had no plans of engaging in a melee.

They retreated from the crypt and rested an entire night. When everyone returned to peak condition, they returned to finish the job. This time they made it all the way to the centre of the third level, a place guarded by four level 15 warriors that were obliterated by a barrage of spells.

Gangdor finally came of use, helping Tiramisu open up the copper door to the core of the crypt. The former's axe had been thirsty throughout this expedition, but it was only now that he could come of use. Be it Richard, Flowsand, or Io, each one was an unreasonable extremist who destroyed everything with their spells.

The troll shaman had long since been stunned into silence. He had only entered the royal crypt once, and had been lucky to escape from the clutches of the undead warriors. However, these invaders made it seem like a walk in the park.

Behind the door was a ten-metre-tall room with a raised platform in the centre. Atop the platform was an enormous gold coffin, with a bronze jar underneath.

"This is where the greatest chieftain of our empire rests, Warlord Drahkzan. Only he has the rig— NO!"

Richard and the rest had seen what set the shaman off as well.



The cover of the golden coffin was open, with nothing underneath. Furthermore, the aura of undeath was especially strong here, already condensed into a tangible grey mist. If not for the unicorn neutralising this power, even Richard's team could not easily survive here.

Richard had Flowsand cast a death guard spell on him before circling around the graveyard a few times. He finally stopped in front of the gold coffin, picking up the bronze jar, "This is the soul jar you spoke of?"

The troll only then recovered from his shock, nodding in reply, "This is it! Only the chieftain has the right to use it, storing the souls of his predecessor. It is said the souls stored here retain a portion of their memories from when they were alive, passing their wisdom down to the next generation."

Richard picked up the jar and inspected it closely, finding several complicated drawings and ancient troll texts engraved upon it. Combined together, they formed what seemed to be a magic array. Richard had never seen these patterns before, but he could sense that the array possessed great power. It was different from the ones he had seen in Norland, storing a shocking amount of power in a few simple strokes. Even if they found nothing else, just understanding this array would be of great help to his growth as a runemaster. He immediately started to think of ways to simplify the arrays he normally used.

However, just like the jars outside, this one was open as well. The chieftain's soul had either escaped or dissipated, but looking at the empty coffin it was most likely to be the former.

Richard muttered to himself for a while before passing the soul jar to the shaman, "It seems like Warlord Drahkzan is linked to the evil spirits. There isn't much else of interest here, let's return and rest for the night. We'll go to the shrine tomorrow and figure things out then."

The shaman bowed deeply to Richard, hugging the soul jar as they left the crypt. Richard knitted his brows, summoning the idle Waterflower and softly whispering into her ear, “Keep a close eye on him when we leave. If he tries anything strange, kill him immediately!”

Waterflower was surprised, “Isn’t he the only one who can trap the evil spirits?”

Richard shook his head, “He said it himself, there are seven or eight troll tribes nearby. Every tribe can afford a shaman at least.”

The young lady nodded. To her, the troll’s neck was no different from a dead tree.

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Fortunately, the night was uneventful. The next morning, Richard took his men back to Zhubvar’s upper levels and headed into the shrine. This place was a pyramid that was tens of metres tall, with an altar on the top level dedicated to Zuka. Flowsand had already deciphered all the texts on the various tablets, so she knew the steps to offer sacrifices.

On their way to the top shrine, the army was attacked by hundreds of infected trolls. However, the party advanced at a steady pace; outside of two people who sustained minor injuries, they defeated all the enemies with no losses at all.

The top floor held a stone altar in the centre. Atop a copper rack in front was a stone basin filled with ashes, and at the sides a pit as tall as a human with sharp spikes at the bottom. A huge statue of Zuka had once stood tall upon the altar, but something unknown had destroyed it. All that remained was the base.

“First, take out the holy incense from the storeroom and light it up in front of the altar,” she read out. Indeed, there was a small storeroom nearby. However, when Richard opened it up to get the incense he was completely startled.

The walls of this room were painted in gold, with a large pot in each of the four corners. There were three copper shelves lining one of the walls, filled with pieces of incense the smallest of which was as big as a bowl. Richard's heart started beating uncontrollably at the smell; this was obviously made from the finest maple amber! Maple amber grew more effective with age, darkening the older it got. The small fist-sized piece of amber he had gotten from Stormhammer was a light colour. The smallest piece of amber on the shelves was still larger than that, and more importantly each one was dark purple!

Normal maple amber was an essential ingredient in the making of many grade 2 runes, but purple amber was an extremely rare material used even in grade 3 runes. It was the fossilised essence of ancient beasts, possessing the ability to communicate with souls. The more powerful maple amber could even cross space or turn back time, allowing people to look into the past.

The sum of the ambers in this room, if brought back to Norland, could easily fetch a price of six to seven million gold! Richard forced down his excitement, returning to the altar with a piece of incense in hand. He then moved to light it with a piece of burning wood given to him by the shaman, something that had clearly been used for millennia but still wasn't used up. He studied it for a long time, but couldn't pinpoint exactly what kind of wood it was.

Before the ceremony could begin, however, Flowsand stopped him, "Are you sure you want to go through with this? Ceremonies like this could invite beings that are far more powerful than us, ones we cannot control. It could get very dangerous."

Richard muttered to himself, feeling the destiny crystal in his pocket. Its presence bolstered his confidence greatly, and he started laughing, "If we want offerings, how can we not take risks? Don't worry, whatever spirit is summoned we can deal with it."

Flowsand sighed, deciding not to persuade him any further.

## Book 3, Chapter 119 - Spirit Lance

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Richard touched the burning wood to the maple amber, which instantly caught fire. One whiff of the smoke and he felt the world starting to spin, his vision turning black and white. The image of a large winged serpent started to appear on the altar.

He immediately stopped breathing in his shock, slowly spreading his mana throughout his body to eliminate the feeling of wrongness. He looked around to find his followers acting strangely as well, clearly trying to recover from the same problem. However, Flowsand and Io seemed to be completely fine.

Flowsand turned back to the scroll in her hands, “Now, present the hearts and blood of the betrayers.”

The troll shaman signalled to his men, and a few berserkers pulled the infected trolls to the altar. He plunged the bone dagger into their chests, digging out the hearts and tossing them into the basin. The flame from the maple amber grew more and more prominent, and by the time the tenth was tossed inside tongues of fire were charging out of the basin ten metres high. Richard noticed these hearts were a strange grey colour, not the normal red.

Every time one of the infected trolls had its heart dug out, the berserkers then threw the creature into the pit. The sharp spikes drew blood from all over the body that was routed along a channel at the bottom into a small hole that absorbed it all. All ten trolls were thus sacrificed to Zuka.

The temperature around the altar dropped greatly, the air freezing over. Richard saw the image of a gigantic serpent through the flames, an invisible will descending upon the shrine. The surge of power was immense, commanding fear and respect.

“Zuka!” Flowsand’s expression warped, her hands gripping tightly onto the Book of Time.

It was at that moment that the doors at the back suddenly opened. The phantom of a troll that was about ten metres tall entered the area, one hand on a spear as he roared in a deafening voice, “WHO IS IT? Who dares summon Zuka? Who has the guts to spoil my plans?!”

This troll was covered from head to toe in armour, a rare sight for his race. His spear was nearly three metres long, the tip terrifyingly jagged. He charged forward, actually slamming his weapon into the back of the image of Zuka. Purplish-black light flickered on the spear, the serpent crying out in pain; no matter how much it struggled, the image gradually grew more translucent. The power of the sacrifice was evidently being absorbed by the spear. The image quickly distorted, and the serpent eventually vanished with a cry.

The troll shaman suddenly charged up to the altar, howling like a lunatic, “WARLORD DRAHKZAN! YOU WERE THE ONE WHO BETRAYED THE MIGHTY ZUKA! YOU WERE THE ONE WHO DESTROYED THE MIGHTY TROLL EMPIRE!”

The phantom on the altar turned its massive head, eyes sweeping across the shrine as though he could not see Richard and the rest. “Who is it?” he shouted impatiently, “Which coward is hiding in the shadows? Come out and face me!”

As if in a trance, the shaman crawled onto the altar and pointed at the phantom that was several times taller than himself, “I am Shaman Janbilar. So you were the traitor, you are the evil spirit!”

“Traitor? No, I did no such thing.” The warlord answered in a surprisingly solemn tone, “I did this to save Zhubvar. The rivers had dried out one by one, my people were suffering. Every day, bodies were taken out of the city. And all this while, the Sacred Spirit that was supposed to be protecting us grew increasingly cruel. He couldn’t find any solution, but kept demanding more sacrifices. So many trolls gave up their hearts and blood, but that was not enough to satisfy his greed. He even wanted his own

shamans sacrificed!

“This was no longer the Zuka of the past, misled by blood and power. It was then that I heard the summons of another voice. It came from a will more mighty than Zuka’s telling me of a way to exterminate him. So I gave up my life, and the lives of those loyal to me; all to deal Zuka a fatal blow. It finally rid Zhubvar of the shadow.”

This was a surprisingly solemn piece of history, written down with darkness and blood.

The shaman was stunned for a moment, but then he seemed to realise something. He pointed at the phantom of Drahkzan, “Warlord Drahkzan, you have been bewitched by evil spirits! The mighty Zuka would never abandon us! Look at yourself, you are now an undead spirit! Your actions led to the fall of Zhubvar!”

The warlord was stunned for a moment, trying his best to recall something. He suddenly cradled his head, muttering in pain, “Where... Where am I? What did I hear? Zhubvar is in ruins? Was I not going to attack the Ashen Plateau to chase those wretched dwarves out of their caves?

“Ah, right. I’m already dead. Why am I here? Wait, I see it! I SEE YOU!”

The phantom’s eyes turned red as he scanned through the shrine once more. Richard and his followers couldn’t help but shiver, as though a bucket of cold water had been poured over their heads.

The troll warlord grew extremely callous, “You are not from my time, why have you interrupted my sleep? Wait, your souls... You are not of our world! I think I understand now, you must be the plunderers and saviours Zuka spoke of. I will not allow it! I will not let you revive him!”

The warlord pointed at Richard’s party, slowly lifting the giant spear in his hands. His movements were very sluggish, as though

he was raising something extremely heavy. When the spear was horizontal, a chill ran down Richard's spine!

The warlord was someone from millennia in the past, and this was only a projection. However, he gave Richard a feeling of immense danger. This could not be ignored— his elven blood ensured that his instincts were very powerful.

Looking at the warlord lifting the spear, the shaman was still in a daze on the altar. "Quick, use the soul jar!" Richard shouted out, "Seal him! He's an evil spirit!"

It was only then that the shaman came back to his senses. He nimbly flipped off the altar and grabbed the jar, eyes flashing with fanaticism as he shouted at the warlord, "Drahkzan! This is your retribution! Sleep for eternity in the sacred artefact, you traitor!"

"No! That will give me incomparable strength. I'll wipe you out easily! Suffer my fury, heathens who disturb my rest!" The spear had already been lifted completely.

"Soul attack!" Io suddenly shouted. The clerics and priests present all knew what to do. Mental fortitude spells and death guards flashed everywhere, every member of the party put under protection. However, none of them knew whether this would be enough to resist the terrifying attack of the warlord.

It was at this moment that the shaman buried the bone dagger into his chest, cutting into his heart. The blade quickly sucked up all his blood, the heart hanging on the end when it was removed. This moment was a display of the vitality of the troll race; even without his heart the shaman started chanting his spell, dark purple tendrils of smoke spewing out of his mouth and twining around the heart. He then placed the dagger in the soul jar and threw it towards the altar.

However, the warlord had already attacked! Hundreds of phantom lances flew out of the spear tip, hitting even the horses in the shrine. Some of the lances even flew out the walls, reaching

every corner of Zhubvar. Miserable cries rang out everywhere as every life within the city was attacked without exception.

Many of the trolls quietly collapsed. Even the level 13 berserkers only managed to last for a few moments before falling to the ground. However, the phantom warlord suddenly widened his eyes.

Before him appeared a few unbelievable images. A radiant ball of light appeared over Io's head, an amber eyeball revealing itself within. The vertical eye fixed onto the spirit lance, stopping it mid-air. Divine power twisted the lance apart, destroying it completely.

"A spirit reinforced by divine power!" Drahkzan exclaimed in shock, "A holy being?"

At that moment, a revolving hourglass suddenly appeared above Flowsand's head. Pale gold grains of sand flew out from within, covering her body. The spirit lance was completely dispersed before it could even get close to her.

"CHOSEN!" the warlord's eyes were as wide as saucers by this point. He suddenly turned around, bloodshot eyes fixating on Richard as he howled, "PLUNDERER, SHOW ME THE POWER OF ZUKA'S PROPHECY. WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO AGAINST MY SPIRIT LANCE?"

The lance had already disappeared into Richard's head. His eyes were tightly closed, entire body shaking slightly. A chilling pain that was difficult to endure spread through his soul, affecting all his followers as well. Every follower connected to him tried to strike back, but they had been attacked as well. They could do nothing to help him.



## Book 3, Chapter 120 - Spirit Lance(2)

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An overwhelming grey tide surged through Richard's soul, a wave of destruction that spread through every part of it. At the same time, the image of a troll appeared deep within his sea of consciousness; Drahkzan had projected himself here!

A silhouette of Richard himself appeared next to Drahkzan, an embodiment of his soul. The troll chieftain laughed heartily, pressing his giant palm against Richard's head, "Kneel before me! Even a plunderer from another world must serve the great Drahkzan!"

Richard felt an enormous pressure on his head, the force so great that his bones started creaking as though they could shatter at any moment. A soul struggle obviously couldn't affect one's physical body so easily; the reason for this feeling was Drahkzan's immense advantage in power. The moment Richard knelt, he would be subdued; his mind would then be chained to the warlord's, a part of his soul extracted as a guarantee. His body would end up just like that of the other trolls, lacking intelligence and only able to survive upon instinct.

And yet, he had no fear nor worry in his mind. Richard was only feeling one emotion right now, humiliation! When he was eight, Elena had taught him resilience. From the moment he had learnt to recognise himself up to their eternal parting when he was ten, she had drilled dignity into his very soul.

This mere troll wanted him to kneel?

The pressure grew increasingly powerful. Richard started panting roughly, feeling a mountainous weight on his back, but he still persisted with all his might. He would rather die than kneel!

However, try as he may, his right knee gave way and smashed hard into the soil.

This was the moment when everything changed, when a dormant volcano erupted.

Richard felt every drop of blood within him burn, his breath growing blistering hot. He breathed in air, but he breathed out fire! Immense shame took over every corner of his mind, leaving him no refuge, no escape. He looked up at the warlord before him, shouting like a wild beast. The sound of bones shattering rang out from within his left knee, but his muscles still flexed as he forced his swaying body off the ground

The warlord was shocked at first, but then he exploded with insanity. The strength within that huge palm doubled in an instant, wanting to suppress Richard's resistance, but Drahkzan felt an indescribably scorching pain all over his hand. Richard's body caught on fire, emitting dense flames that were thick as flowing lava.

The web of blood vessels that was his Archeron bloodline emanated an incomparable heat, each vein widening greatly as the lava surging within grew faster and faster. Threads of lava spewed out of his blood vessels, turning into a raging inferno that gathered deep within his soul.

He entered a strange state. His primary consciousness was still raging, but his second turned calm and cruel. The two were distinct polar opposites, but somehow controlled the same body. He opened his eyes and looked at Drahkzan, feeling both raging fury and cold vengeance. He didn't notice that the troll who had been many times taller than himself was now slightly shorter.

From Drahkzan's perspective, Richard had already stood up straight. However, the boy only came up to his waist. Glaring at him coldly was actually an infernal demon built of the flames coming from Richard's body; its form was unclear, but the mere presence left an indescribable fear assaulting his mind. The warlord found that this golden-eyed demon actually left him terrified!

The warlord suddenly remembered something, his voice turning ghastly, “How... How could it be y—” However, he could not finish speaking. The demon snarled, a tempestuous force blowing the phantom away. Drahkzan’s image quickly distorted, disappearing into an explosion.

Richard slowly opened his eyes and surveyed the area. The altar was empty, the troll phantom long since dissipated. The maple amber in the basin had already been burnt out, but there were still threads of the heady fragrance in the air. Humanoid warriors, knights, and throwers were lying all over the place in disarray, most of his followers on the ground as well. Only Flowsand and Io seemed to have come out of this unscathed, even Zendrall and Kellac looking conscious but in terrible shape. The unicorn lay weakly on the ground, its horn lacking lustre. The troll shaman had collapsed on the altar, his body drained of blood. He no longer had any life force within him, the same as all the berserkers. All the signs showed that Warlord Drahkzan had truly been here.

He closed his eyes once more. His memories were a blur, real and virtual mixed up. He still remembered breaking free of some bindings in his extreme fury, bursting forth with power. The warlord in his soul had completely broken down to his scream, dissipating. The fear in Drahkzan’s eyes was still clear in his memories.

Thankfully, even though those with weaker wills like Olar would have to recuperate for a while, all his followers were still alive. Most of the broodmother’s drones were fine as well, only collapsed from the fear. The spirit lances were a spiritual attack, so they had little effect on these puppets with no souls. The elites with their own minds, however, had suffered heavy casualties. Almost all of them had been wiped out.

Those of the church who weren’t fallen were basically unaffected. Leaving Flowsand and Io, even Caesar who was only level 6 was basically fine. However, the fallen clerics had all

received great injuries; even a level 13 fallen priest like Kellac had not been exempted. It seemed like the true servants of the Eternal Dragon had a special defence against spiritual attacks.

Richard turned to find Flowsand and Io staring at him, gazes as though they were looking at a monster. This was something that rarely ever happened; he touched his face, ensuring that he hadn't turned into someone else. Still, the stinging gazes left him feeling slightly uneasy. "Where's Drahkzan?" he broke the silence himself.

Their expressions turned even stranger at this question. "You really don't know?" Io asked.

Richard was confused, "How would I know?"

Io stared at Richard for a good while, his eventual reply full of resentment, "Fine, I'll pretend like I didn't see you acting stupid! You howled at the warlord and he just disappeared! That was a ghost that was level 18 at minimum, and he was attacking you with a spirit lance spell!"

"Mm. You two are fine, no?"

The battle priest puffed out his chest and answered arrogantly, "The power of my soul is second only to a holy being, nothing below the legendary realm can affect it! Flowsand is a chosen priestess of the Eternal Dragon, even a lesser god's attack is a joke to her!"

Richard was rather surprised, but by Io and not Flowsand. Outside of grand priests, only those who reached level 20 could be considered holy beings. The only limits for servants of gods to advance was the power of their souls and their piety. In other words, as long as nothing went wrong Io would have no problems reaching level 20.

"Aren't you much more amazing than I am? I'm a mere level 12 mage," Richard mocked himself.

“That’s different!” Io corrected him in a grave tone, “Flowsand and I could only save ourselves, but you dissipated the phantom with a howl! That’s completely different! Is your soul beyond that of a holy being?”

“That’s impossible!” Richard denied resolutely. However, Io’s expression was one of utter disbelief.

Ruminating over the battle in his soul, Richard felt rather rueful. This was a battle that revealed his true nature. He now knew that he could be destroyed, but he would never be subdued.

“Where’s the soul jar?” he suddenly remembered.

Io seemed confused, “You’re still fixated on the sacred artefacts?”

“Of course, that’s an offering! It’s very valuable!” Richard stated resolutely.

Io was left helpless in the face of this wealth-starved maniac; be it as a heavenly guardian or a battle priest, he had no concept of money. He just pointed at the jar that was atop the altar, lid closed. A few of the ancient characters on the jar’s surface were flickering with light.

Richard grew stern, carefully walking up to the jar and closely examining it before picking it up. “If I didn’t see wrongly,” Io added, “the soul of that troll was absorbed by the jar.”

With Drahkzan’s soul within, the soul jar’s value as an offering would increase exponentially. Richard jumped off the altar, passing it to Flowsand. Her eyes in turn started glowing amber, shooting out a hazy radiance that covered the jar. Seeing the light the thing reflected, she nodded, “It’s definitely enough to hold an intermediate ceremony.”

It was only then that Richard’s followers and other soldiers started to get up. Io glowed with divine light once more, quickly restoring their strength. On the other hand, Richard started rummaging through the shrine. The troll shaman had mentioned

three sacred artefacts, and this soul jar was an intermediate offering. The other two had to be powerful as well.

However, whether it was intentional or not, the shaman hadn't mentioned what the other two artefacts were.

# Book 3, Chapter 121 - Dawn of Chaos: The Ashen Plateau

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Richard soon found a little hall behind the altar, decorated beautifully. The Zuka statue here had been destroyed as well, revealing a broken piece of wall whose cracks made it evident that there was a hidden storeroom here. Finding no form of energy undulations on the other side, Richard carefully opened up the path to the secret area to find a tightly-sealed copper vial. A powerful vitality spilt forth from the vial, filled with a violent strength. A few words had been carved into the side, simple enough for even him to read— Blood of the Sacred Spirit.

Blood of the sacred spirit? Zuka's blood?! Richard was pleasantly surprised; the blood of such a powerful existence was an unobtainable treasure with a myriad of uses. If he wanted to, he could even offer this as a sacrifice to the Eternal Dragon.

He hastily called Flowsand over, and after some careful examination and testing through timeforce she flipped through the Book of Time for a while before stating with confidence, "This should be Zuka's blood, the second sacred artefact of the troll empire. The grand shamans of the era used to ingest the blood of their sacred spirits, allowing them to communicate with them and use a portion of their powers. This is lucky, Zuka is a powerful being with an exceptional vitality. Even with his main body withered away, this blood is still extremely useful."

Richard suddenly remembered the process through which his unicorn had been created, immediately lowering his voice, "This could be useful for the broodmother."

Flowsand nodded, "Mm. The broodmother needs to ingest all sorts of powers to absorb. I don't know what level Zuka was, but a sacred spirit with intelligence that can absorb faith should be no less powerful than a great dragon."

Richard carefully stored the vial in his robes. While he had taken an exceptional risk in making this journey to Zhubvar, the spirit lance nearly taking his life, the profits had been tremendous. Just the high-quality maple amber alone was a huge amount of wealth, and these two sacred artefacts couldn't even be measured in terms of money. While he had lost nearly twenty elites, it was definitely worth it. That was only ten days of output from the broodmother.

However, he wouldn't stop here; there was still a third artefact to find. However, even with all his warriors rummaging through the shrine for a long time they didn't find anything else of value.

Flowsand checked through the Book of Time for a long while, eventually using the inscriptions on the stone tablets to decipher that the third artefact had something to do with the grand shaman. It was said to be an artefact that held Zuka's prophecies and great power.

"Quickly, the shaman's residence!" Richard decided immediately. Two of the three artefacts were already in his possession; there was no reason to leave the third out.

The shaman's residence was below the shrine and to the right, several metres higher even than the chieftain's domain. At the core of the place was a stone table meant for artefacts, and upon it was a strangely large piece of parchment with words written on it in blood. So much time had passed that the blood had turned to a dark shade of purple that was almost black.

"Page of Holding!" Richard exclaimed immediately at the sight. The parchment's aura was quite familiar to him, and the two pages he already held were reacting to its presence. There was no need to search further; he knew instantly that this was the third sacred artefact. He moved over to the stone table and picked up the page to fuse it with those he already had, but on second thought he had Flowsand come over to read what had been left behind.

Even Flowsand took a few minutes to interpret the contents. This



was the prophecy from Zuka that both the shaman and Drahkzan had mentioned, passed down from generation to generation:

“The rivers of life are about to run dry. The capital of the trolls shall turn to ruin. Zhubvar shall wither away and be covered in dust, only revived when the rivers of life flow once more. The source of chaos is the Ashen Plateau.”

Below this, the grand shaman had left what seemed to be a journal entry:

“Six of the seven rivers of life have vanished; the waves of the last disappeared a month ago. We can only pray as we watch the cracked riverbed. Zuka has disappeared for a long time. Has he abandoned us, or did he enter the Ashen Plateau to search for the source of chaos? That is the land of the dwarves, those tiny creatures are difficult to deal with. But all the rivers of life flow from the Ashen Plateau, and one must pass through the dwarven kingdoms to understand why they have dried up.

“Those stubborn little things won’t let us pass; I have decided to decorate our spears with them, using them as sustenance for our brave men. Zhubvar’s wells are rapidly drying, and we will soon be without water to drink. This battle with the dwarves is necessary!

“We shall return.”

The contents of the page gave Richard another glimpse of the troll empire. All the rivers had dried up and the well water was gone, turning Zhubvar into a dead region. The trolls had no choice but to leave this place, most of them likely dying in battle on the Ashen Plateau. Zhubvar was left without any inhabitants, time weathering it into a ruin. The capital of the trolls had thus entered the books of history.

However, there were still many puzzles that were yet to be resolved. How had Zuka prophesied their arrival?

Flowsand copied the page’s contents to the Book of Time, and

Richard then placed it together with the other two. A powerful energy wave surged as the Book of Holding emitted a blinding radiance, and by the time everyone recovered the three pages had merged into a regular book. Complicated patterns were carved on the copper cover, with a row of divine script that even Flowsand couldn't recognise. This book seemed to have a hundred or so pages, but no matter how much he tried Richard could only flip through three.

The merging of the three pages gave the book an extra slot. It now held five grade 7 spells, although these spells had to come from the user himself. This was now an artefact powerful enough to turn the tides of a magic battle.

The army stayed at Zhubvar for another two days, carefully searching through the troll capital. However, they found nothing more of value outside of the altar itself. The broodmother could probably consume it for a boost in power, so he decided to find some time to bring her here after the Bloodstained Highway project was complete.

Richard finally headed back from Zhubvar, returning to the army stationed in the Bloodstained Lands. The nobles had already reorganised themselves, so they continued their march northwest. The only disruption to the journey this time were a few bandit groups who didn't know better, and eventually the level red soil gave way to a greyish-white slope that extended all the way up to the horizon.

They had reached the Ashen Plateau. A bird's eye view would show a clear divide between red and grey, distinctly marking out the boundary between the Bloodstained Lands and the Ashen Plateau. Even Richard couldn't help his surprise at such a mystery.

The dry air of the Bloodstained Lands gradually vanished, replaced with a chilly and humid breeze. The cold only grew more evident the further they went; the day after they entered the plateau, they could already see permanent snow on the distant

mountain peaks.

Thick, coniferous forests were everywhere in the Ashen Plateau, the needles leaves the same dark grey as the rocks of the mountains. Although it was cold, there were sources of water were everywhere so the army had little to worry about.

A gentle valley formed a natural path. The afternoon of their second day walking along this passage, Richard finally saw one of the cliffside fortresses unique to the dwarves on a hill. This was a place made entirely of rock, six to seven metres tall. It had four or five levels in total, two of which were underground with the entrance at the back. One had to enter the first underground level and make their way through the tunnels to the top. Every level had long slits for gunmen to station themselves at, allowing them to fire at any attackers.

The appearance of this stronghold meant they had properly entered the dwarven lands. The existence of the fortress meant this was a place the dwarves could not afford to lose. Richard had his unicorn stop and sized the place up and down, finding it difficult to believe that they truly had arrived.

A steel helmet poked its way out of the peak of the stronghold, a loud voice ringing out, “I see you, humans, this is dwarven land! Leave now, or my rain of pellets will remind you never to underestimate the determination of Firebeard!”

The dwarf had spoken in human tongue; this was evidently not the first time they were dealing with humans. The nobles behind Richard abruptly started cheering in excitement! It really was the dwarves! The Bloodstained Highway project wasn’t just a fantasy!

The nobles, especially those who had stuck with Richard from the start of the project, were exceptionally worked up. They cheered, shouted, and hugged each other, some even using their energy to bolster their cries. Even the mages started to amplify their voices with mana.

## Book 3, Chapter 122 - A Dignified Beard

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Richard had never known a few hundred people could make such a terrifying sound. The nobles had gone insane, using their internal energy and magic in a unified scream that left him terrified. However, that wasn't the end of their celebration. This time, they unanimously decided to toss their weapons into the air. Powerful magic equipment emitted a dazzling radiance as they flooded the sky at different heights...

And then they started to fall!

Richard had no choice but to insta-cast a few ranged barriers to protect these excited fellows. Io and Flowsand similarly busied themselves; if they did not do so, a few unlucky ones would be pierced through by the swords falling from the sky. Each of these weapons was superior-grade, so the little energy these noble youths had could do nothing to protect them.

Every noble that had come on this expedition had at least some level of ability in a fight; even Zim had killed a few imperial soldiers during Salwyn's siege. They could normally just jump up and catch their weapons, but in this chaotic situation nobody could be sure. After all, a number of these blades in the sky were enchanted to pierce armour easily.

Although Richard's side was completely chaotic, Firebeard was terrified as well. Hundreds of people had suddenly shouted in unison, the resulting sound completely overwhelming his voice. A few hundred weapons were then tossed into the air, the magical radiance almost blinding him. He could swear on his beard that he had never seen so many enchanted weapons in his life.

Perhaps it was out of nervousness or perhaps it was the sense of threat, but the hand of one of the guards trembled. A loud explosion rang out as the gun in his hands fired, black smoke surging into the air. The boom from the gun was several times

louder than Firebeard's loud voice, even cutting through the cheers of the nobles.

Richard was slightly shocked at first, but that immediately turned into delight. Guns! This was one of his goals in coming to the dwarven kingdoms; the power of guns was obvious.

The nobles behind him had a much larger reaction. Many of them thought they had been attacked, catching their weapons and gathering their energy. Some cast defensive spells, while a small number of timid ones checked if they had any injuries. In actuality, they were at least a hundred metres away from the fortress and the dwarf's gun had been pointed upwards. At this range, even a perfectly aimed shot would not reach them at all.

On top of the fortress, Firebeard was furiously shouting at the dwarf next to him, "Copperbeard, you useless thing! Why did you shoot... Wait... By my beard, what am I seeing?"

It was then that large groups of cavalry finally showed themselves behind Richard and the nobles. They filled up the valley path in the blink of an eye, countless warriors surging forth.

"There should be at least 3,000 there!" Richard heard someone shout.

A cacophony immediately took over the stronghold, the air filled with the uniquely coarse voices of the dwarves.

"3,000? Quick, send a report!"

"What do you mean 3,000? There's at least 5,000 here! They still have people coming in!"

"No matter how many there are, I, Blackiron, will crush their skull!"

Many heads appeared behind the crenellations, every dwarf that saw Richard's army and equipment going wide-eyed. Gigantic gun muzzles quickly replaced these heads.

Richard looked behind himself. There were less than 2,000 warriors here, but because the vanguard was made entirely of cavalry they seemed more numerous than they were. Coupled with the fact that the drunk dwarves hated numbers and loved exaggerating, it was no wonder they would overestimate. The army outside the valley numbered 10,000 anyway. No matter how sturdy this fort was it only held a few dozen dwarves; it would be a simple matter to take it out. However, they had not come here for war.

Every dwarf in the Ashen Plateau was a precious resource.

Richard went ahead alone, only stopping when he was less than fifty metres away from the fort. “My name is Richard!” he shouted brightly, “I am not here to fight, but to drink liquor and make friends! May I know if this is the Anvil of Thunder?”

This caused another flurry of discussion amongst the dwarves. “The Anvil of Thunder are in a mountain to the southwest, three days away. This is Forgefires, the land of the great Toro Anvil’s descendants. Human, if you came to make friends why did you bring so many soldiers? No matter how many you have, you will not frighten the descendants of Anvil!”

Richard smiled, “We come from the far east, and had to cross the entire Bloodstained Lands to arrive here. You must know those lands are filled with bandits and slavers everywhere; without the protection of these men, I would not be able to come here.”

Firebeard hesitated for a moment, “You humans are liars, I don’t believe you! You catch so many of our kin and take them for slaves!”

Richard did not mind the dwarf’s brashness, “Not all of us. The Anvil of Thunder is working very closely with us humans; if they are willing to believe us, why would Forgefires not? I believe a friendship stands to benefit both of us. Of course, if Forgefires rejects these friends from far away we can go look for the Anvil of

Thunder too.”

“How can a tiny tribe like that compare to the powerful Forgefires?” Firebeard spat out, “We are a kingdom! However, us becoming friends is not up to me. That has to be decided by the King.”

Richard said, “Good! Then take me to His Majesty.”

“But your soldiers must remain outside!” Firebeard shouted. Seeing Richard’s army still growing, he was slightly flustered. He had never seen such an enormous in his entire life; even put together, Forgefires only had a few hundred thousand citizens. The dwarf was no fool; he knew that someone who could lead such a big army was definitely powerful. Richard definitely qualified to meet the king.

“No problem.” Richard immediately got his troops to halt and find a suitable place outside the valley to set up camp. In the meanwhile, he sent someone to the caravan in the back to have them speed up. All the items meant for trade with the dwarves were there, and with a chance to meet the king Richard was confident that they would come to an agreement.

He then brought his followers and seven noble delegates as well as ten Archeron warriors, following Firebeard into the fortress.

A short distance behind the stronghold was a passage dug into the mountain; this was the only way to Forgefires. The path was surprisingly long; so far was the other side that even Richard couldn’t see to the end. It seemed like this tunnel crossed straight through the mountain.

The passage was five metres wide, but it had an extremely low ceiling that was less than two metres tall. Richard had to be careful; with his boots on, he would knock his head into the top if he didn’t pay attention. Io and Olar needed to keep their heads bowed, while Gangdor could only make it through by hunching. Human warriors above level ten were normally well over two

metres tall, so even the Archerons suffered terribly.

Tiramisu just stayed behind with the rest of his men. The huge fellow was over three metres tall, so he would only be able to crawl through the passage.

Of course, this height was no problem at all for the dwarves who were 1.4 metres tall on average. Even Firebeard, someone considered tall and sturdy amongst the dwarves, was only 1.5 metres. They could all show their power to the limit here.

They only made it a few hundred metres through the passage before Gangdor started to feel like his waist had gone crooked. Richard had accidentally knocked his head a few times, while the others fared even worse. This passage showed Richard exactly why the glorious human empires could do nothing against the dwarves in the mountains. These tunnels dropped the humans' power by a third while amplifying the dwarven guns greatly. A formation of just three or four dwarves firing simultaneously would fill the passage with deadly power that left one with nowhere to hide. Even a saint of Faelor would be left bleeding profusely as long as the attack was from within ten metres.

Firebeard said it would take a day's journey to make it all the way to Forgefires Stronghold, the capital of the kingdom. The city was built on top of a volcano nearly a millennium ago, the mountains nearby completely emptied by the dwarves constantly digging through them. The lava flowing underground had made the place a natural furnace, allowing them to smelt metal endlessly. All sorts of ores were produced within Forgefires, so the kingdom was famous for its smithing within hundreds of kilometres.

This area was rich in obsidian, repeated smelting and forging turning it into one of the best materials for both weapons and armour. The best goods of the dwarves were practically all made from this metal.

Forgefires Stronghold had over ten thousand residents, with all



the elite warriors of the kingdom present here. The rest were spread about the thousands of square kilometres of mountains nearby, many working in the mines.

Things went fine along the way. Richard kept conversing with Firebeard and the dozen-odd other dwarves, gaining a good understanding of Forgefires and even striking a friendship with them. They felt he wasn't quite bad, quite liking his beard. The only thing they felt pity for was that his facial hair was too short; in Firebeard's words, a beard had to reach one's waist at minimum. Only then would it be dignified.

Richard obviously wouldn't keep a beard that suited dwarven tastes, but he had never expected the one he did to help him earn their friendship. Of course, the barrels of premium alcohol he'd brought along had great effect as well.

The first passage was about three kilometres long. Once they came out on the other side, they walked a full day through a valley and passed through two more tunnels to reach Forgefires Stronghold.

## Book 3, Chapter 123 - Forgefires

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Standing in front of Forgefires Stronghold, Richard couldn't help but admire the dwarven capital. In front of him was a mountain a thousand metres tall, a few hundred of which looked to be carved out by giant axemen. The slices were in picturesque disorder, each a building about ten metres tall with all sorts of windows, entrances, and ventilation paths. Giant, carved stones decorated the entire city, with a sculpture that was several dozen metres high towering over the entire city. This was the statue of the great founder of Forgefires, Toro Anvil, said to be a being approaching the legendary realm.

Far in the distance, the bottom parts of the mountains nearby looked like a giant beehive with dwarves entering and exiting from every hole like ants. Richard was rather moved at the sight; this was a race of workers, constantly excavating, building, and forging. Although their numbers weren't incredibly large, centuries of diligent digging had created this miraculous scene before his eyes.

Indeed, a strong perseverance was the basis of many miracles.

After some simple interrogations, they passed through two tunnels and entered through the gates of the stronghold to arrive at a magnificent hall that was nearly a hundred metres high. Standing in this place that had a perimeter of 500 metres, Richard felt like an ant. At the end of a tightly shut metal door nearing ten metres in height, with four passages on its sides. These passages were just like the ones he had seen before, rather wide but awkward for humans to walk in due to the height. When fighting in this sort of terrain, one would only be able to display two-thirds of their power at most.

Richard looked up, seeing numerous windows of varying sizes on the wall opposite him. Near the ceiling was a large natural hole; if an intruder rushed in, the dwarves only needed to close the gates

and they would be faced against an attack from all sides. Even heavy infantry could not take a warhammer tossed from so high up.

Richard frowned slightly at the sight. He hadn't expected the dwarven fort to be so impenetrable. At the very least, his current army couldn't even begin to consider attacking Forgefires.

The dwarves of Faelor were known to be a race that worshipped their ancestors; there was no lack of tribes whose ancestors had become gods. A kingdom of such a race had worshipped that statue of Toro Anvil for more than a millennium, infusing it with a powerful soul. There was a high possibility of it becoming a demigod or sacred spirit, leagues ahead of the orcish statue he had stolen from the Cracked Canyon. Richard estimated that the statue was comparable to the head of a greater devil.

He had to put aside any thoughts of attacking the stronghold. Without a guarantee of being able to weaken the dwarves greatly, he wouldn't have much of an advantage in the negotiations. Thankfully, he had made ample preparations for this, ready with a second plan. They would trade as equals.

Of course, the first plan was basically to conquer the dwarves completely.

Once they entered Forgefires, Firebeard brought Richard and his party to a large forge deep within the fortress for a look, perhaps to show off. Lava could be seen pouring out of the cracks in the ground, rising to the surface and splitting into several small streams. Flowing past the legs of a few statues, the berserk fires were tamed and the flow grew smoother. These pathways then led underneath the great furnace, constantly heating it up to melt the ore within.

"Those statues are special," he said to Firebeard, "I smell the power of fire and steel in them."

Firebeard immediately grew proud, "Those are the statues of the

most outstanding smiths of Anvil's descendants. They house the valiant souls of the grandmasters, controlling the lava to turn a source of destruction into fire for the great forge!"

"Valiant souls?!" Richard seemed shocked.

"Of course! When they were alive, these grandmaster smiths were all saints. Nearing death, they willingly sealed their souls into these statues out of their matchless passion for ores and metals, turning into valiant souls that protect the Kingdom."

Richard turned to give Flowsand a look, finding a similar fervour and regret in her eyes. There were such valuable offerings right before their eyes, but they could not take them away; this was quite an uncomfortable feeling. Every one of these statues was worth a lesser ceremony.

"So, how is the lava pushed all the way up here?" he continued to ask, "The cracks in the ground are hundreds of metres deep."

"That is the power of Toro Anvil!" Firebeard looked very passionate, "Had he not restricted the might of the magma underneath, Forgefires would not exist today."

Richard continued questioning the dwarf, but outside of learning that there was a shrine to Toro deep underground he could glean nothing else. Firebeard himself had never been to the shrine; the high temperature there was something ordinary dwarves could not withstand. Only saints with special protective equipment could enter the place.

After the tour of the stronghold came to an end, Richard finally met the dwarven king in the throne room. It was the 22nd generation of Toro Anvil's bloodline, Bamor Steelhammer.

The throne room was just as grand as the rest of the city hall, the twenty-metre-tall ceiling inspiring reverence for some reason. At the end of the hall was a tall flight of stairs with the throne at the top, the King sat upon it looking over Richard and his entourage.

On the cliff-wall behind him was a mural of Toro Anvil creating the great forge, while at both sides of the throne were curved platforms with four high-backed iron chairs each. These chairs seated the eight elders of Forgefires; Firebeard introduced them and mentioned that half of them were descendants of Anvil while the rest were outstanding dwarves from other regions.

There was a totem carved into the back of each chair, representing the domains of the elders: exploration, excavation, mining, smelting, refining, brewing, offerings, and battle. This set of domains showed just how passionate dwarves were about metal, but the fact that even brewing had an elder assigned to it was out of Richard's expectations.

After an exchange of pleasantries, King Bamor got to the point, "Human, your attention to etiquette is impressive; we see your respect for the dwarves. If not for that, you would not have been able to come here. In front of Forgefires, your army of 10,000 is nothing!"

"Indeed," Richard expressed agreement, "Forgefires will not fall."

"Forgefires Stronghold hasn't fallen since the day it was built," the King exclaimed in a thunderous voice.

"The defences of Forgefires are astonishing, but that means nothing to me." These words caused the faces of all the dwarves to change, but Richard's continuation eased them up, "I did not cross the Bloodstained Lands to make war. I hope to befriend Forgefires, forming an alliance that can stand the test of time."

Bamor nodded his head slowly, "Many of my kin still live in human slave camps, but you seem different from them. Fine, let me see what you have brought."

Richard waved his arms, and four Archeron warriors delivered the little wine barrels they had been carrying to the foot of the stairs. The royal guards then delivered them to the King, who

picked up one that was decorated black and gold and opened the stopcock. A concentrated smell of alcohol immediately caused his expression to change; he took in a deep breath of the aroma and shouted, “Bring my golden cup!”

The guards darted away, returning quickly with nine wine cups of different styles. It wasn't just the king; every elder present had their own favourite cups. The quality and styles of the cups were all different, the only common point being that they were massive.

Bamor and the elders had grown anxious in the mere three minutes it had taken for the guards to return. If not for the presence of the humans in the hall, they definitely would have started drinking straight from the barrel.

The King personally poured every cup, completely emptying the barrel by the time he was done. The smell permeating through the hall left the guards gulping their saliva down as he raised his golden cup, “For the Forge!”

“For the Forge!” The elders drained their cups in a single gulp, and the throats of the guards moved a little.

Richard suddenly had a thought: if he'd poisoned the alcohol, could he not have eliminated the ruling class of Forgefires in one go? However, he immediately gave up on this unrealistic idea. All dwarves had strong physiques that were resistant to poison, and each of the elders present was a saint. Bamor himself was level 18, qualifying to be a saint even in Norland. Regular poison wouldn't even give these fellows a stomachache. Besides, Forgefires still had hundreds of thousands of citizens. Even if nine leaders were killed, another nine could quickly replace them.

Bamor wished to continue drinking, his eyes sweeping past the other three barrels before he turned towards Richard. Each of the four barrels was decorated differently, and the quality could be judged from their style. He had moved directly for the best barrel, not touching the other three.

He suddenly turned to an elder next to him, asking in a whisper, “What is this human called again?”

“Richard.” This elder was rather meticulous.

## Book 3, Chapter 124 - True Friendship

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“Very good, Richard. This is some of the best alcohol I have tasted in the 130 years of my life. Although every human visitor has known we dwarves like liquor, yours is the best.” Bamor then pointed to the three remaining buckets, “Are these three barrels any different?”

“Why don’t you try them all?” Richard waved.

“Alright!” Bamor immediately had the guards open the rest of the barrels, finishing them all off alongside his elders. These barrels truly were inferior to the first, getting blander as he went along.

A thought struck Bamor, his gaze at Richard suddenly lighting up. “Are these the things you want to offer in trade?”

Richard smiled in reply, “These barrels are all of different qualities: supreme, high, average, and mediocre. Descendants of the noble Toro Anvil, how is the taste of the mediocre liquor to you all?”

Bamor exchanged looks with a few of the elders, one of whom admitted straightforwardly, “Even that is very good. The best alcohol from the previous humans tasted just like this.”

Richard’s smile grew even more charming, “It’s this mediocre liquor that I’m offering at a price of five gold per barrel.”

“What!?” Six of the eight elders actually leapt up from their seats. The past traders who had come here had taken fifty gold a barrel for such alcohol. Richard’s price was basically as good as a clearance sale.

Bamor was extremely surprised as well, but he remained silent. If even the mediocre liquor was so cheap, one didn’t need to ask how much the rest would cost. “So, how much have you brought?” he asked in a low voice after the commotion from the elders died down.



“My caravan has 20,000 barrels.”

“WHAT?!” Even Bamor was moved by this number. This batch of liquor could last all the dwarves in Forgefires for a week.

However, Richard continued, “There are also 5,000 barrels of both the high and average grade liquor in total, but only ten that are of supreme quality. Those can be considered a bonus.”

Bamor’s case rose and fell rapidly a few times before he answered loudly, “Very well! Richard, what else have you brought me other than liquor?”

This time around, Richard was even more straightforward, “Foodgrains, namely barley, wheat, oats, and corn that add up to a total of 3,000 tonnes. And that is only the first batch.”

This time, Bamor just leapt up from his throne. “Foodgrains?” his voice reverberated through the room like thunder.

“Foodgrains,” Richard was quite composed.

“Why foodgrains?” Bamor’s gaze was electric.

“Why not?” Richard’s beard made his smile look particularly charming to the dwarves.

Bamor immediately took large strides down the steps, standing in front of Richard and extending his arms. Richard bent over, tightly hugging the man.

The King’s hug was a symbol. In this moment, Richard was truly accepted by the dwarves of Forgefires.

Forgefires Stronghold was so grand in scale that it could accommodate up to 500,000 dwarves, which was the entirety of the kingdom’s population. The main reason for the dwarves’ sparse population was a constraint in food. The climate in the Ashen Plateau was a bitter cold, so only some parts of their valleys could accommodate agriculture. Food had been a problem for the dwarves ever since they had been driven out from the plains, only

slightly resolved when they dug deep into the ground and found large swathes of natural caves with edible mushrooms within. However, even if they planted mushrooms in all the caves they could find that was only enough to maintain the population.

The strength behind a true saint's hug was as imposing as a mountain. Richard could barely breathe, but he suffered through it until Bamor let go and spoke to him. "Richard, my friend... What do you wish for from the Forge?"

Richard had long since been prepared to answer, "Metal, ore, weapons, armour, firearms, and of course, gunpowder."

Bamor's eyes twinkled as he laughed heartily, "Your appetite is enormous. However, you deserve it. You will not be disappointed in the friendship of the Forge!"

The noble delegates all beamed with joy. Every word of Bamor's promise was as valuable as cases of gold.

When the Bloodstained Highway project had begun, many of them had been puzzled by Richard's decision to carry large quantities of alcohol and foodgrains in the caravans meant for trade. Liquor was a traditional staple of trade between humans and dwarves, the latter of which could not resist fine wine at all, but food was a different story. It was cumbersome, difficult to transport, and limited in value. Many could not comprehend what he hoped to gain with that decision. It was only now, as the scene unfolded before their eyes, that they understood the significance of the foodgrains. They were exchanged for true friendship.

Richard could sense the gazes behind him filled with joy, envy, and admiration all at once. This had nothing to do with foresight at all; anyone patient and meticulous enough would gain some understanding of the situation in the Ashen Plateau after interrogating so many dwarven slaves. The human countries had large numbers of dwarves as slaves themselves, and being so close to the Ashen Plateau the Bloodstained Lands were filled with them.

It wasn't difficult to actually acquire the information; it was just that almost nobody would think of doing such a thing.

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Bamor held a grand banquet to welcome Richard's party, leaving his elders to discuss the details of the trade with Olar and the various noble representatives.

Richard and Flowsand spent a peaceful night in the castle, and the next morning she mentioned to the king that she wanted to see the holy shrine where the dwarves paid respect to their ancestors. She said it was to revel in the splendour of the dwarven ancestors, as well as to understand their culture better. Of course, Bamor approved immediately. There were more than ten heroic characters in Forgefires' history who had outstanding achievements, and the King was a man who was proud of his heritage. He was very willing to share their glory with these friends of another race.

The shrine was buried deep in the mountain, a majestic building complex where the main shrine was fifty metres tall. An enormous furnace was right in the centre of it all, boiling iron constantly flowing out from within. Around the furnace were over ten dwarven statues in various forms; even Richard could sense the faint divine light on their surface. Every one of these dwarven statues had reached the level of a valiant soul; any one of them was worth a sacrifice on its own.

There was an altar beside the furnace, the statue upon it much larger than the rest. This particular dwarf held his hammer up high, shaping a weapon on an anvil. The statue was vivid and lifelike; Richard felt a consciousness stirring within it when his gaze fell upon it, returning the stare and instantly causing his mind to buzz. He felt a splitting pain in his head that left him on the verge of collapse, as though he had been struck by an iron hammer.

Flowsand immediately cast a soul protection spell on him, while Bamor rushed forward to shield him. “Noble Toro Anvil!” the King said in a resonating voice, “This is not an enemy of the dwarves but a friend! He brought fine wine and foodgrains in bulk, enough to keep all the dwarves in the castle fed for a long time!”

The statue of the founder of Forgefires seemed to hear Bamor’s words; Richard felt the heavy pressure on his soul slowly dissipate. One had to know this statue only had a sliver of Toro’s power within it. The true shrine was buried further underground.

“It’s alright now, friend!” Bamor grabbed Richard’s hand apologetically, shaking it with some force before pointing at the statue, “Look, that forged hammer and anvil were both divine weapons used by him when he was alive, holding unimaginable power. Whenever Forgefires acquires precious materials and prepares to make a legendary item, we use them in order to succeed. At least ten legendary items have been formed on that anvil in the past few centuries!”

Richard’s gaze fell on the hammer and anvil, and this time he noticed the undulations of power from the two divine weapons. A thought suddenly struck his mind, “Your Majesty, these weapons should require formidable strength and skill to use. Are there any master smiths in the Kingdom who can completely unleash their powers?”

“Of course!” Bamor replied proudly, “and more than one too! Outside of myself, the forging elder Crushedrock can completely display their powers.”

Richard was delighted, “That is simply wonderful! I have two precious image diamonds on hand, and was intending to embed it into something. However, I could not find a master capable of processing it; I believe you or Elder Crushedrock should be up to the task.”

Bamor’s face grew solemn, “Image diamonds? That’s a tricky

item to handle... But since it's a request from a friend, we will do our best."

Metalwork and gem embedding had always been a field of expertise for smiths, especially those who were dwarves. Richard toured the entirety of Forgefires outside of its restricted areas over the next few weeks as Bamor and Crushedrock worked without rest, using the divine weapons left behind by Toro Anvil to embed the diamonds into a silver case. The case was merely the size of a brick, its base black with silver edges. The entire body was made of an alloy of obsidian and silver, the base and connecting components even being pure silver. This left the case extremely sturdy, but it still retained a great affinity for magic. The image diamonds were embedded perfectly into the bottom of the case, combining perfectly with the metal.

## Book 3, Chapter 125 - Where Dreams Begin

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With the image diamonds embedded into the case, Richard could have a grand mage from Norland engrave a spell formation to activate their power. The case would thus turn into a spatial magic sealing box, able to hold about two cubic metres within. The isolated space of the image diamonds would also make whatever was put within weightless to an extent. As long as the case didn't exceed two tonnes in weight, he would only be able to feel the box's own weight.

The case itself was at the epic grade. Forget the material, even the workmanship alone would be worth a great amount. However, Bamor considered this to be a symbol of Forgefires' friendship with Richard; he refused any payment.

By this time, Richard's caravan had made it all the way to Forgefires Stronghold. To the tune of thousands of dwarves cheering, barrel after barrel of liquor and sack after sack of foodgrains were unloaded from the carts. Large quantities of weapons, ingots, ores, guns, and gunpowder took their place.

The alcohol and grain had given Richard nearly a million gold coins, most of which came from the food. The dwarves paid 150 gold coins for every tonne and had done so willingly. They were a strong species with a much larger appetite than the average human, every adult consuming at least one tonne of food in a year. Richard's 3,000 tonnes would allow Forgefires to feed exactly as many more citizens. Besides, this was only the beginning; he would continue to transport more as time went on.

Faelor was an extremely fertile plane, so it wasn't short on food; a tonne of grain could be purchased for merely 20 gold in agricultural areas. Of course, transportation was also a huge factor; it took 50 coins' worth to transport every tonne. On the other hand, the prices of the supplies he had bought in bulk from the dwarves would grow severalfold when they returned to the human

countries, the final price reaching about five million gold coins. Although one needed to cross thousands of kilometres to cut through the Bloodstained Lands, large caravans could make the entire journey two to three times in a year.

With a point of access established, these caravans could transport kilotonnes of produce and other trade items with every trip. Richard even intended to set up two large supply points at Camp Kvensen and the Cracked Canyon, allowing the travelling caravans to rest and restock. Troops would be garrisoned there to safeguard the entire trade route.

Even disregarding the profits from future caravans, the revenue from the project was 5 million gold, something that dropped down to about 2 million in pure profit once food, transport, and army costs were considered. Richard received a quarter of that 5 million, but his losses in combat were much lower than those of the rest. Most of the dead under him had been former slaves or combat drones, so he didn't have to pay much in the way of compensation for death in service. His expenses added up to a total of 500,000 at most, leaving 750,000 gold in profit. This was a lot higher than the other nobles.

However, the true advantage lay in what came after. Two caravans could now constantly shuttle between the Sequoia Kingdom and Forgefires, making the trip five times a year between themselves. These caravans wouldn't be as large as Richard's, but they would also suffer fewer casualties at the same time. There would be no need for them to pay a large sum for relief and compensation. Thus, every caravan would still reap a profit of about 2 million per round trip, making for a total of 20 million gold. It was impossible to fully assess this value.

According to their initial agreement, Richard would take a quarter of the ultimate profits from the trade route. In other words, as long as he controlled the channel towards the Ashen Plateau, he would reap a profit of 2.5 million gold every year.

Of course, he actually earned far more than that. The rare materials he had found at Zhubvar were worth six to seven million on their own, with the Page of Holding, the blood of the sacred spirit, and the soul jar having immeasurable value. The statues from the orcs and various other tribes were priceless as well; if one had to find a way to measure them, it would have to be the difference between a level 7 broodmother and one at level 6.

An insane idea like the Bloodstained Highway had finally succeeded, and its rewards were equally outrageous. The large army slowly made its way back, a thousand men each left behind to guard Kvensen and the Cracked Canyon. Orders for slaves had already been sent to the large merchant organisations of the Bloodstained Lands; there would soon be 10,000 slaves working on building forts at each of these camps.

By the time Richard returned to Bluewater, it was nearing three months since they set off on the journey. The oasis was bustling with life once more, simple houses constructed on a large scale. Numerous adventurers were rushing to Bluewater from the human kingdoms every day, hoping to begin their own adventures in the Bloodstained Lands. Even before Richard had arrived, news of the project's immense success had already spread through the Sequoia Kingdom and its neighbours. The news had turned to gossip quickly, and after passing through a few mouths become absurd legends. The ore in Richard's caravan had turned into rubies and gold, the length of the caravan extended severalfold.

The Bloodstained Lands had turned from a place of death and danger to a country full of riches and gold. People were saying one might uncover gold wherever they placed their shovels, attracting countless criminals, thieves, robbers, and adventurers who could no longer stay in the human countries. This place had turned into a land of dreams.

The moment they returned, Richard was immediately faced with the problem of dividing their gains from the expedition. The



project's tremendous success and huge profits were enough to make anyone go crazy, so dividing the delectable fruits of their labour became a huge issue. It wasn't just deciding which of them got how much; Richard also had to consider how to keep these gains from other hands. Fortunately, everyone who had participated in the plan shared his interests.

Another problem was the Mage Association. Richard believed their last meeting was sufficient to express his stance. If they were willing to back down to some extent, then he would actually be willing to make some concessions as well. He did not wish to really cooperate, but time was something he needed a lot. Norland's greatest advantage over Faelor was in powerhouses and mages; he could easily recruit tens of mages at level 10 or above and purchase superior-grade equipment for enchanting in bulk. With both of these in his hands, he would have taken over the source of the profits the Association needed to survive. He saw no use in keeping them around for any extended period of time.

He had already taken his share of the profits from the project in advance, mostly in weapons and ingots of obsidian. These weapons made from quality obsidian were even beyond those made of lafite steel that he had gotten from Norland. There were a total of 400 weapons in this batch, all of which he intended to take back to Norland for enchantment before returning to Faelor to sell. Other than that, he also received five epic-grade weapons from Faelor as personal gifts; two warhammers, two one-handed axes, and one two-handed axe. They were also made from obsidian, but had been forged with Toro's hammer and anvil. This bestowed them with enhanced durability, while Bamor's mastery of smithing gave them added sharpness. This was a unique advantage of dwarven mastersmiths; all of their items were enhanced in one or more properties by nature. Magic could then be layered on these devices, making them much more powerful than ordinary enchanted items.

Quality goods with dual-enhancements like those from Bamor

would easily become epic-grade goods after only two enchantments. Bamor's best items even held three properties instead of two, forming the basis of legendary equipment.

Richard hadn't idled around in the past three months himself, especially during his month-long stay in Forgefires. He had used the period to complete the three Savage Barrier sets he needed to finish his deal with Nyris, while advancing his own mana pool to close in on level 13. Even fully focused on his astral affinity, he would surely advance in level within a month or two.

He would be nearing eighteen years of age by the time he reached level 13. This was hard to come by even in Norland, but he was still unsure of his limits. He could stop at level 18, or he could go all the way to level 20 or even surpass that to enter the legendary realm.

Either way, his top priority at the moment was to return to Norland once more. He needed to convert the large sum of wealth on his hand into power, and offer the soul jar from Zhubvar in exchange for divine grace. Discussing things with Flowsand, he had decided to hold the ceremony at the church building in Faust, limiting the loss in grace due to distance. Of course, things could be looked at from another perspective: the more the offerings that were made in Faelor, the more the power that would be channelled into the Book of Time. Its connection to the Eternal Dragon would thus be strengthened, reducing the cost for future offerings every time.

After returning to the oasis city, Richard had a hundred humanoids and three elite bat scouts rush over to the Land of Turmoil to deliver the blood of Zuka and all the divine items they had found in Zhubvar and Kvensen to the broodmother. He then left Olar and Kellac to deal with the negotiations as he brought Gangdor, a few strong Archeron warriors, and Flowsand to quietly return to Norland.

## Book 3, Chapter 126 - Trouble

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When priestess Noelene sensed the portal from Faelor emitting waves of energy, she rushed over to see Richard panting badly on the floor with a chest that was much larger than him tossed nearby. Not far away, Gangdor was slumped on the ground, his burly body covered in shiny sweat. Three massive chests that were bound together had toppled next to him, just their size making her legs feel like jelly. Although Gangdor was astonishingly strong, he still had to activate both his bloodline and his runes alongside the buffs of various spells to haul these things back. Still, he wound up so exhausted he collapsed the moment they exited the portal.

The Archeron soldiers streamed out of the formation one by one, each hoisting a chest that they could barely carry. They too collapsed the moment they left. The final person to walk out was Flowsand, but even she was carrying a miniature magic sealing chest that caused Noelene's jaw to drop.

"Richard!" Noelene liberated Flowsand immediately before grabbing Richard by the collar and raising him up from the ground, "Couldn't you just have brought another person back? You made even Flowsand move a chest?!"

Richard replied with a charming smile, "Beautiful priestess Noelene, planar teleportation is very expensive. Another person would mean another 40,000 gold in cost.

"You!" Noelene was left tongue-tied for a moment, but then she tightened her grip and raged, "You're a royal runemaster but you want to save a mere 40,000 gold?"

Richard's smile became even more enchanting, "I gave the money I saved to Flowsand."

Noelene suddenly felt like she couldn't stay angry for a length of time. Still, she was rather reluctant and glowered at Richard for a while before putting him down. She had once again displayed a

strength far beyond her petite frame.

“Flowsand, how long can you stay this time?” she asked her junior.

“Two days,” Flowsand replied.

Noelene frowned. “So short? There’s going to be an intermediate-grade sacrifice in a week. Stay a few days, I’ll give you the chance to host it. Right now, you need divine grace.”

Flowsand shook her head, “No, we can only stay for two days at most. Don’t worry about the grace; with the offerings Richard brought back this time, we can hold a ceremony tomorrow.”

Noelene turned to Richard in surprise, her gaze growing much softer, “There are offerings already? Seems like this fellow is pretty capable. Alright, I’m not worried then; go meet high priestess Ferlyn, she wanted to see you the moment you returned.”

After Flowsand left, Noelene then freed up the other weary Archerons one by one, letting them recover as quickly as possible. Richard handed two magic sealing chests full of ores and metal to her, exchanging it for nearly a million gold coins. This time around, he had her exchange 200,000 of that for 400 magic crystals, spending another 300,000 for 100,000 enchanted crossbow bolts. The remaining amount was converted into cash.

With the limited time, Noelene could only employ a dozen or so level 10 mages. The obsidian ingots Richard had returned with were slightly lower in value than cloudiron, but still much more valuable than lafite steel. These metals were specifically used for the weapons and armour of high-grade rune knights. The ingots Richard had returned with were worth 500,000 and would take a full two months to enchant. That wasn’t good enough.

Noelene watched as Richard had the Archeron soldiers organise and transport the supplies, utterly surprised when she saw the obsidian ingots. She hadn’t thought Richard would get his hands

on another source of high-grade materials so quickly. She couldn't help but order all the obsidian once it was enchanted, willing to pay for it in advance.

However, there were still dozens of magic sealing chests which had yet to be opened. Richard opened ten of them, and the priestess' expression immediately changed. The chests were densely packed with all sorts of weapons, and looking at their glossy black surfaces that seemed almost liquid she knew every one of them was a premium product forged from obsidian. Although they hadn't been enchanted yet, every one could be sold for about 5,000 gold or so. Staring at ten crates of such weapons, Noelene found it almost difficult to breathe.

She picked up a broadsword and examined it closely. The dwarves' exquisite workmanship was hard to miss, greatly increasing the value of these weapons. "How many?" she couldn't help but ask.

Richard wiped the sweat off his forehead, "Four hundred."

"Four hundred!" Although she had already guessed it, the priestess was rather shaken by the confirmation. Even a grand priestess of the Eternal Dragon would be stirred up in the face of two million gold.

"What do you intend to do with these things, anything that needs my help?" she asked. She could effortlessly handle ores worth a million gold with her connections, but these weapons worth double that surpassed her ability.

"I plan to enchant them and then take them to Faelor to sell them off," said Richard.

"I can think of a way to help with that, but it isn't my field of expertise. If you don't have a suitable channel, you can come back and look for me."

"Thank you! I feel like giving you a hug already!" Richard

grinned, a particularly odd charm to his smile.

Noelene blushed a little and snorted, pointing to the remaining two chests on the ground, “What about them?”

Richard hesitated a little, but eventually he opened one of them to reveal more weapons hidden inside. This was the chest containing the premium goods that were handmade by Bamor, capable of becoming epic weapons.

The moment Noelene’s eyes fell on them, she gasped, “Epic-base weapons?”

She couldn’t stay reserved any longer, picking up a two-handed war hammer right away and inspecting every inch of it. The tip was two-sided, one side a hammer while the other was a spike. Both were flickering with an unusually sinister tint, not a magical radiance but a display of the smith’s exquisite skill.

This was a first-class epic-base weapon. If it passed through the hands of a truly skilled grand mage, there was even a small chance of it becoming a legendary weapon. Even in Norland these weapons were amongst the finest works. The dwarves of Norland weren’t much stronger than those of Faelor in terms of smithing, and while Norland had mages aplenty they really lacked such high-end weapons. Every one of these weapons could easily sell for a hundred thousand gold.

The total price of these five weapons wasn’t as high as the 400 others put together, but they still felt different to Noelene. The items Richard had revealed earlier were resources that made others envy the plane he controlled. However, these epic weapons meant he had already integrated into that plane and fostered close ties with its higher powers. This meant the planar war had already advanced to the second phase. How long had it been since the fellow even entered Faelor?

Noelene placed the hammer back into its chest and cast her gaze on the last unopened one. Intuition told her its contents would

shock her greatly.

Richard could tell that Noelene was expectant, but he hesitated a little before walking to the chest. Placing his hand on the cover, he was in no hurry to open it as he lifted his head and smiled at her, “Reason tells me I shouldn’t open it.”

But then he popped the lid open loudly, revealing chunks of dark maple amber of all sizes. A rich fragrance immediately filled the hall.

Noelene was so stunned even her gasp was delayed. “Top quality maple amber...” she muttered softly. She could instantly tell how much this chest was worth.

Richard slowly closed the cover of the chest, standing in front of it and waving his hand to direct her attention back to himself. It was only then that the priestess regained her senses, instantly turning red and clenching her teeth, “You brat! You did it on purpose, right? Do you want to make me look like a joke? Do you want to die?”

Richard giggled in consent. Anyone trained in magic would lose their sense at the sight of so many top quality maple ambers.

She bit her lip hatefully, “You’re really asking for it!”

Richard laughed heartily, signalling to the soldiers to lift the chests and head out of the hall. Before leaving, he suddenly turned around and flashed a smile in her direction, “You’ll have to ask Flowsand first!” With that, he turned and left gleefully.

“Richard! Wealth will only be wealth!” Noelene didn’t know why she had said those words.

“I will turn it into power!” Richard replied.

As she watched his receding back, Noelene suddenly felt like she was losing her senses for a moment as she saw the shadow of another man. She sighed gently, muttering under her breath, “This fellow... Know what’s best for you, don’t be too careless.”

Richard returned to his island without talking to anyone else, calling for the old steward at once for the latest news about the family. He flipped through the information on the family planes as he listened inattentively; after all, only ten days had passed in Norland since his last return. What could happen in ten days? The private planes were most likely to undergo an upheaval.

But as the butler went on, he suddenly raised his head in astonishment, “What? The taxes of another territory halved?”

“Yes. Sir Kunder said that bandits were rampant within his territory. The tax payments have been robbed for two weeks in a row.”

Richard lifted his head to stare at the ceiling, gently tapping on the armrest of his chair for a moment, “If I remember correctly, Kunder manages a decently sized territory that’s on the border. Let me think... he’s next to the Schumpeters, no?”

“Yes.”



## Book 3, Chapter 127 - Trade

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Richard's frown grew more intense. "21 of the family's 59 territories have shown a decline in taxes... these fellows don't have any patience at all. Do you think Kunder is just making these bandits up, or is it a raiding party from the Schumpeters?"

"I cannot be sure," the old steward replied. The man normally devoted his time to the family's internal affairs, so he couldn't make a judgement about the state of the vassals. Richard wasn't really looking for an answer either, he was just asking off-hand.

He stood up and paced about the room, his expression growing gloomier with each step. A few dozen rounds and he suddenly raised his hand, about to fling the tax report to the ground, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. He placed it on the desk gently, his fury replaced with a chilling calmness when he lifted his head once more, "Tell Kunder that he can halve the taxes next season as well if the bandits remain so rampant."

The old butler was utterly surprised, but he said nothing. Having been with Gaton for many years, he clearly knew Kunder was just another chess piece. There were a dozen-odd vassals like him who would just serve as tests for Richard. If he couldn't establish control of his lands, the Archeron fiefs would likely collapse and fall apart.

Richard started caressing the tax report softly, as though it was a lover's face; however, the icy glare in his eyes would leave a chill in one's heart. "Schumpeters..." he muttered softly, "You've been completely destroyed, but you still want to play tricks behind my back?"

Judging from the distribution of the territory and the range of influence, only the Schumpeters could have tempted Kunder. However, the real mastermind behind this all was Duke Mensa. The Mensas were sworn enemies of Archeron just like the

Schumpeters and had been similarly crushed by Gaton a while ago. Even though they knew Gaton was trapped in the Rosie Plane leaving the Archeron lands empty, they didn't have the strength to start another full-fledged war. The shrewd and experienced Duke shifted his focus to annexing the Schumpeters, who were only a piece of meat up for grabs at this point. There were also those under Gaton who could be swayed, and dividing them up would be quite effective at wounding the Archeron Family. The power of this strategy could easily be seen in the tax report Richard was looking at.

Richard passed the report back to the old butler, "Investigate the lords of all the territories that reported a significant decline in taxes or something similarly strange. Mark everyone you think is abnormal. I hope to have a report of that by the time I next return."

"No problem," the butler agreed.

"Has there been any news from the Deepblue?"

The butler immediately took out a piece of paper, "Her Excellency Sharon has entered hibernation. It seems like she will remain in this state for about three years or so."

Richard was startled, "Master is in hibernation? Did she say why? Is there any special information for me?"

"I'm afraid not, Young Master."

Richard went silent for a moment before nodding, continuing the arrangements for the private planes. He planned to take 50,000 crossbow bolts himself, sending the remainder to Asiris. The situation in most of the other planes was still stable for the moment, and he couldn't really afford to help any of them.

Lina had sent a letter to him from the Forest Plane, explaining her predicament. After they had taken over the city, the surrounding forests started growing much more rapidly. The

attacks of the aboriginals grew fiercer and more frequent, assassins constantly killing off the logging teams that were being sent out to cut down the trees. Archers who were level 16 or above were starting to appear more often, forcing the Dragon Mage to remain on guard and rely on the support of the magic tower. She was worried the natives would launch a siege soon; although she was confident in being able to weather the storm for now, the situation was evidently going downhill.

The Forest Plane was extremely valuable, or it wouldn't have been prized by the Schumpeters. Every corner of the local forests was home to rare species of trees, including many types of wood that could be used to manufacture powerful enchanted crossbows. A rare vine had also been discovered on the outskirts of the city, the essence of its fruit allowing mages to increase their mana growth by 10%. This essence was known as mana essence, something charged by the gram in Norland. Its effects weren't obvious on low-levelled mages, its value instead lying in the fact that even legendary beings could feel its effects.

Every gram of this essence was worth a thousand coins, and just the area around Emerald City could produce half a kilogram every year. Lina could only sustain the war effort by relying on the trade of timber and this mana essence.

The real problem with the Forest Plane lay in what was termed the Walking Woods. The aboriginals possessed abilities similar to druids, able to have trees uproot themselves and walk a certain distance before taking root in another region. As best as Lina tried to chop the trees down, Emerald City was being surrounded on all sides. What's worse was the discovery that the locals had a power boost of about 20% in the forest.

The Dragon Mage had transported dozens of cubic metres of rare timber out recently, and the old steward had already found carpenters to begin building superior-grade longbows from it. Once they were enchanted, these bows would be worth nearly

3,000 gold each, and this batch was enough to produce hundreds.

There were only a few hundred guards on the Archeron island. After the uproar from the novice knights, Fuschia had recruited 200 and 1,000 people in the island and Blackrose Castle respectively, beginning intensive training. However, it was a strain for the poverty-stricken family to even equip a thousand soldiers; there was no way more men could be transferred out to assist Lina.

After muttering to himself for a while, Richard eventually sent a message to Lina telling her to hang in there as he thought of a way to help.

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Nyris and Agamemnon arrived punctually on the island at noon, having received his message. However, Richard didn't meet them in the study, instead taking them directly to the family warehouse.

Nyris was beautiful as ever, but he looked completely worn out. This didn't diminish his appearance, however, adding a layer of melancholy to his looks instead. This would attract two types of extreme reactions: one was a desire to come up with a way to solve his problems, while the other was a bestial urge to ravage him.

To his horror, Richard discovered himself being more inclined towards the latter. It caused the royal runemaster to break out in sweat, secretly filling up with fear. This wasn't just because of Nyris' status, but because the Fourth Prince was a man.

There were plenty of homosexuals in human aristocracy, and that was a fact not just limited to Norland. Richard himself hadn't reached that point yet, but who knew how things would turn out? After all, the Archerons were famous for being unpredictable.

Once he repressed the strange feeling in his chest, Richard was then beset by curiosity. Nyris was a royal son, and he wasn't dumb or weak either. What could have tormented him to such a state?

However, time was precious; every minute wasted was ten

minutes lost on Faelor. “Friends, I need another batch of superior-grade weapons, shields, and armour. This one will need to be larger than the last.”

“Wait, what?” Nyris was dumbstruck, his face instantly turning pale as snow. Fortunately, Agamemnon has always been cool-headed. He asked, “Price, quantity.”

“According to the list you gave me last time. And as for the quantity, I’ll need about a thousand sets.”

Even Agamemnon couldn’t help but take a deep breath, “Too much, this exceeds my limit. Nyris!”

“Huh? What?” Nyris was startled by the mention of his name. He had just heaved a sigh of relief, looking to be rejoicing to himself. Agamemnon ignored his distressed state, continuing nonchalantly, “Richard needs too much. Take over everything beyond my limit, about 8 million.”

Nyris couldn’t help but draw in a deep breath as well. His face instantly turned deathly pale as he said in a soft voice, “I... I can’t fork out that much money!”

“Get it from the royal warehouse,” Agamemnon pointed out, not forgetting to add another sentence, “The price is different.”

Nyris’ face regained some blood. It was only then that the Fourth Prince realised Agamemnon’s prices were a little higher than what he would have to pay to draw the weapons from the warehouse. Although the difference was only 3-5%, that still made for a huge sum at this scale. The income from this trade would be enough to make up for half of the deficit he had suffered last time, something that made the prince who had been dealing with an economic crisis overjoyed. The lofty Fourth Prince had never imagined that he would one day be so excited of a few hundred thousand gold.

After nailing down the deal for the weapons and equipment, Richard walked in front of a magic sealing chest. “This is part of

the payment for the goods,” he said as he lifted the lid.

Seeing the maple amber within, Nyris subconsciously gasped in surprise. Agamemnon’s breathing grew more urgent as well. Richard patted the chest, “This is about seven million’s worth.”

All the maple amber Richard had brought back was of the best quality, untouched and unprocessed. Both Nyris and Agamemnon could easily find people to cut, treat, and process these ambers into finished artefacts and runes, selling them off bit by bit. Done properly this would net them a total of about eight million, but it would need time. Richard didn’t have the patience or the channels, so throwing this stuff to these two was the best way forward.

## Book 3, Chapter 128 - Trade(2)

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Nyris couldn't hold back his excitement, an unusual flush rising up his cheeks that caused him to seem delicate. A quick calculation revealed that the revenue from processing all this maple amber was entirely enough to level out his current debt. He would actually be able to break out of his bankruptcy!

Richard then took out an intricate silver-lined case, pouring some mana within to cause it to float in the air. He then opened the lid and pushed it lightly, send it towards Nyris, "Here are the three Savage Barrier sets, the effects are even better than the two before. I'll sell at a discounted price of three million."

The two others didn't care for the sets inside the case at all, eyes completely focused on the box itself. Gazing at it for a full minute, Nyris asked Agamemnon, "What did you find?"

"Image diamond, embedded by a dwarven grandmaster. Gravity isolation, spatial equipment... Hmm... The diamond can be activated further."

Richard was surprised by Agamemnon's skill at appraisal. The youth had basically seen through the case entirely. Richard had activated the image diamonds himself, but he didn't have the skill or mana to use them completely; they were working at half of their capacity. The space inside the box was only one cubic metre in volume, and could only accommodate one tonne. Only when his level increased could he activate them further.

Nyris gave Richard a long look, "I really have to reevaluate you. You actually managed to get two image diamonds and a dwarven grandmaster to embed them. Just the box is worth more than a million gold, and the three sets—"

"Take the sets. The box isn't for you," Richard bluntly interrupted the Prince's fantasy. With his dreams destroyed, Nyris groaned.

Richard then opened another chest, the five epic-base weapons within causing the eyes of the two to light up. He ended up selling four to them in exchange for three enchantments on the two-handed axe, bringing it to full epic grade. Two of the three enchantments had to be Rip and Heavy Blow.

The excess money from this exchange was used for a magic item to increase his own strength. Agamemnon ended up trading him a magic necklace from the Ironblood Family that barely made it to the epic grade. Although its stored magic barrier was basically useless, the 10% increase in casting speed and spell damage was quite useful to him. Paired with the Twin of Destiny's increase in damage and spell penetration, his killing power was greatly increased. Richard himself had a penetration rune, so everything stacked up would basically destroy any resistance his enemies had towards his spells.

As for the 400 obsidian weapons, Richard gave the two a hundred in exchange for enchantments on the rest. However, it would take at least one month for all of these weapons to be enchanted; that was almost an entire year in Faelor.

With the trade concluded, Nyris and Agamemnon hastily left. The value of this transaction was far too huge, so they needed to take their time with the arrangements lest they make careless mistakes.

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Nyris remained taciturn as he and Agamemnon left the floating island. Before the two parted ways, however, Agamemnon suddenly spoke up, "Follow Richard to Faelor."

The Prince jumped up like a frightened rabbit, shouting in reply, "What for?!"

"An investment."

The curt reply only increased Nyris' reaction, "Investment? Are



you saying I can't make money and feed my army myself? Why do I need Richard?"

"For points. You only have two years left," Agamemnon stated dully.

Nyris was like a snake with its bones extracted, losing all the strength in his body. He had already lost the right to ask for temporary allowances, and his budget in the next year would not increase either. While this transaction had helped patch up the debt he had incurred, he was currently in a passive situation; without Richard, he didn't know how to make up for the 200,000 gold he was going to lose next year. This was no small amount, pushing him several steps back. The other royal children wouldn't sit by idly in this period of time, using the opportunity to turn this difference in wealth into power and using their strength to increase their points. In two years, there would be an important test. Those who lagged behind would lose their rights to inherit the throne of the alliance, the vacant spots filled by those princes and princesses who had newly become adults.

"But..." Nyris said somewhat timidly, "It feels like there's no honour in it."

"There's even less honour in losing the throne."

"Alright, I'll think it over again." The Prince had no choice but to yield, gloomily walking towards the imperial teleportation formation.

Agamemnon shook his head as he looked at the receding back, entering a portal himself.

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Agamemnon's men sent the necklace over in the evening. It was an elegant artefact with a massive azure gem on it, named the Heart of the Moon Goddess. The necklace had accrued a bit of fame, so it didn't take much verification before Richard wore it

right away. With how much he was focusing on his astral affinity, Richard didn't worry about his mana growth in the future. However, potential did not equate to current strength. He was starting to place importance on equipment now; that would lead to a direct increase in power.

Night slowly fell on Faust, the city of miracles once again illuminated by the light of the moons. In the highest tower of the castle, Richard sat where Gatton used to and slowly entered deep meditation. His mind slowly went quiet, his body growing translucent to his soul as it revealed his awakening bloodline. The third branch of the astral trunk had already produced its first leaf, giving him a new ability: Deep Awareness. This allowed him to find high-grade astral rays nearby with more ease.

Motes of blue light began to appear all around him, large and small, slow and fast. Richard could now move his consciousness at will, slight ripples rocking his surroundings as though he was a large fish swimming in water. He couldn't go too fast, and as he tried to capture the high-grade astral rays he had plenty of problems. The grade 3 rays weren't just faster than him, but also appeared for a very short period of time. Even relying on calculating the trajectory and barring the path, his success rate still wasn't high. However, Deep Awareness showed him the ripples caused by the movement of his consciousness, revealing exactly why it was so difficult to catch these rays.

Every time his consciousness approached a ray, the ripples produced by its movement changed the light's trajectory. The higher the grade of astral ray, the quicker it was to be affected by the ripples. Richard thus changed his approach, racing to the predicted locations and then lying still to let the ripples fade. The experiment was a success; although a grade 3 ray hit the aftershocks, it didn't escape his range.

This discovery immediately increased his success rate with high-grade astral rays, allowing him to pull them into his body one by

one. Most of the rays merged into his astral affinity, while a small portion were turned into mana.

Time passed as he meditated, the branches and leaves of the astral bloodline growing lush with life. It seemed like the second leaf on the third branch would appear soon. The Archeron bloodline wasn't lagging behind at all, the web-like veins emitting traces of volcanic heat that was burning hotter than ever before. His bloodline had been strengthened under the threat of the spirit lance in Zhubvar, creating a phantom demon to protect him. Ever since then, Richard felt like he was close to unlocking a third Archeron ability.

Just as the meditation session was about to end, a wisp of splendid seven-coloured mist suddenly appeared in his senses! Its existence was recorded in the Deepblue Fantasy, mentioning that it was a grade 5 astral ray that was called the rainbow mist and possessed wondrous strength. Even grand mages rarely ever found these things!

Richard was extremely lucky. His consciousness was right next to where the astral mist had spawned, so a slight movement and he grabbed hold of the area instantly. However, the moment he caught it he nearly jumped up from the ground. It was as though his consciousness had caught a burning piece of coal, the heat searing his very soul.

His mind went completely blank.

When he recovered, he found the rainbow mist was still tightly grasped by his consciousness. Even blacked out, he had refused to give up. However, a grade 5 astral ray was far too powerful for him right now. His soul was nowhere near powerful enough to tame such a source of energy. Richard had to use all his willpower to drag the mist into his body, losing control the moment it entered. His consciousness was completely repelled as the mist spiralled within him, not entering the astral affinity or even his mana pool but the Archeron bloodline instead. In that moment, Richard felt

as though a volcano had erupted within his body. Surging fires violently rocked his blood, making him feel like he would be burnt to ashes!

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When dawn broke on Faust once more, Richard recovered slightly from a bout of extreme weakness. He somehow managed to get up and go downstairs, finding a vitality potion in the study room and impatiently drinking it. Half an hour later, he was a little better.

He reached his right arm out, slightly bewildered as he looked at the wrist. There was a mark of fire upon it, not like natural flames but a totemic symbol of some civilisation instead. He had never seen nor heard of such a mark before, but the arrival of the symbol also indicated a whole new ability that had never been seen in the Archeron Family before— Sacrifice!

## Book 3, Chapter 129 - Fury

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Sacrifice was an ability that could activate a power far beyond that of regular magic. It would amplify whatever spell Richard cast greatly, but the price was that the mana used to cast the spell would permanently vanish from his body. In other words, three grade 6 spells under the ability's effect would push him back down to level 11.

This ability could not be used lightly outside of a life and death situation. However, it truly was befitting of the Archeron bloodline—insane, determined, and with no way back. However, Richard stared at the symbol on his wrist with a crazy thought in mind. With the elven bloodline and the meditation technique from the Deepblue, his mana growth was several times faster than that of an ordinary mage. Even if he used Sacrifice once a week, he could continue to advance at the same rate as a regular mage.

The path of magic was long and boundless. The further along Richard went, the more he felt like the existences ahead of him were full of surprises. Sharon, Mordred, Beye, even Gaton... Richard's perception of the distance between them only continued to increase.

He couldn't close the gap by being a jack of all trades. He had to choose one path and walk it to the end, and Sacrifice was just perfect. It continued with his emphasis on killing power.

Today was the day for the sacrificial ceremony. Richard was mostly fine by the end of breakfast, so he brought Gangdor and a few guards along as he set off for the Church of the Eternal Dragon. Flowsand had finished the preparations long ago, and it wasn't his first time either. The ceremony began very quickly, and thankfully the options this time were finally back to normal.

There were only three choices for the blessings. Outside of the planar passage strengthening that he hoped for, he could choose

eight years of extra life or a legendary item called the Lava Ring that would greatly enhance his spell damage especially for the fire element. The Lava Ring was quite tempting, but Richard chose to strengthen the passage instead. Right now, he was shuttling between Norland and Faelor quite frequently; the more he strengthened the passageway, the more he would save.

Besides, he had another thing to consider. Basically everyone purely loyal to him was in Faelor right now, and the broodmother was there as well. If he wanted to raise his influence, he would need to bring a large army out from Faelor. These little offerings would add up, greatly reducing the cost of moving said army. This blessing was one that was more useful the earlier he obtained it.

The ceremony thus ended quite quickly, the price of teleportation dropping down to 15,000 coins' worth. However, during the entire duration timeforce kept hovering around his beast-tooth bracelet. The largest tooth kept emitting a searing heat that rejected the power of time, once more reminding him of its extraordinary nature. Mountainsea came to mind. He sighed once the ceremony came to an end.

"What's wrong?" Flowsand asked from beside him, amber eyes full of concern.

"It's nothing."

"Hmm, alright." Seeing as Richard was unwilling to answer, she didn't push him either. She instead supported her necklace with her palm, showing it off, "Look, my Waterdrop Necklace has been strengthened. It's the Springwater Necklace now."

Richard knew that the Waterdrop Necklace had been part of the Reincarnation set. Now that it had been strengthened to form the full Springwater Necklace, Flowsand's divine spells were amplified twofold. Ceremonies always gave the officiator some amount of divine grace, and it seemed like she had used hers to strengthen the necklace. The item was now near the legendary grade, but as

someone who already had the Book of Time Flowsand had no problems bringing out its full potential.

However, Richard did not closely examine the properties of the Springwater Necklace, instead taking a step back and looking the priestess up and down for a while. He then smiled, “It suits you well.”

This was not an answer Flowsand had expected. She paused without a smile, leaning into his embrace and closing her eyes. She could hear his strong heartbeat through his chest. They shared a quiet moment within the shrine.

It didn’t take long for a whisper to break the silence, “When are we leaving?”

“Probably tomorrow afternoon.”

“Alright.” In that moment, the girl didn’t feel like thinking at all.

A while later, Richard left the Church of the Eternal Dragon. Every stay at Norland was for a very short duration, and he was always extremely busy. Not long after they got back to the floating island, a servant hastily entered Richard’s study and exclaimed, “Young Master Richard! There’s a problem! Young Master Wennington got into a fight with someone in Faust and has already been caught!”

“What?” Richard’s first reaction was to think that the servant must have gotten something wrong.

No matter how much the Archerons had declined, they were still one of Faust’s fourteen. He had just risen to the status of royal runemaster as well, so how could they be bullied to this extent? Who had so much courage? Besides, Richard knew Wennington’s personality. The youth was of the same age as him, but he was too mature to take things too far.

The servant grew anxious, “Young Master Wennington had a conflict with the young master from the Mensa Family. They took

him away, saying he would be brought to the duelling arena. Young Master Richard, his injuries are grave. You cannot delay!”

“Mensa?” Richard calmed down the moment he heard this name, “Tell me what happened, in detail.”

This servant had been following Wennington for seven or eight years now and had always been loyal to the youth. No matter how anxious he was, he knew this was a serious matter. Thus, he held back his anxiety as he recounted the day’s events.

It was actually quite straightforward. Wennington was out buying some materials he needed in Faust, and had met Duke Mensa’s youngest son along the way. The two families were already in a feud that could not be resolved, so they inevitably exchanged some words. However, the young Mensa had said something in Wennington’s ear that enraged the normally-calm youth, who instantly punched the boy’s face.

The Mensa youth’s nose had been smashed, but that wasn’t all. Most importantly, many had seen Wennington launch the blow; the strength in that attack could definitely be considered a challenge to a duel. In the end, Wennington who had only brought along a few ordinary servants and had been seriously injured by the Mensa Family’s men had been captured and brought to an inn near the duelling arena.

The young Mensa had threatened the Archerons to find a way to bring him back, or he would fight a duel in the arena. Once they started the fight, interference would be impossible. Running from a duel was the biggest blot on a noble’s honour. To many, honour and reputation were more important than their very lives.

Richard was in no hurry to make a move, instead thinking it over for a while, “So their target isn’t Wennington. For now, at least, he won’t be in trouble. Young Mensa wants to use him as a lure to bait someone else out. And from the looks of it, that can only be me.”

The servant did not dare interrupt. While he was very worried



about Wennington, he knew that speaking now could bring about unexpected results.

Richard knocked on the table lightly, asking after a moment, “What did he tell Wennington?”

The servant had never dared to hide anything, “I only heard a little, and it seemed to have something to do with Miss Venica.”

The servant was thus immediately sent to bring Venica to the study. Richard then waved him away and closed the door before turning to look at his younger half-sister. Under his gaze, the girl grew slightly awkward.

Richard looked calm, but his left hand was repeatedly balled into a fist before spreading out, “Wennington was seriously injured by the Mensas and is in an inn next to the duelling arena. The servant says the fellow said something about you into his ear, which is why he lost his calm and threw the first blow. Is there anything you want to tell me?”

“I...” Venica immediately turned pale, unable to speak for a moment. However, her actions were enough to give Richard a rough idea of what had transpired. He grew more serious, “The Mensas should be aiming for me, so Wennington will be fine for now. But anything could happen as time passes; you’d best treasure this.”

“It happened a week ago...” Venica began.

This event had occurred in Faust as well. A young and energetic Venica had been angered by Duke Mensa’s eldest grandson, secretly duelling him. Both were level 9 warriors while Venica had already unlocked a bloodline ability, so she had been certain she would win. However, the opponent had come with two pieces of epic-grade equipment, while all she had was a superior-grade weapon. The results were as expected.

The corner of Richard’s eye twitched slightly, “What was at

stake?”

Venica paled, obviously left traumatized by the day's events, “If he lost, he would have to kneel in public in Faust's plaza and apologise for humiliating Father. If I lost, I... I had to strip for him.”

“And then? Nothing else happened, right?”

“N-No.”

“I see. So the Mensa boy probably said something about your body that infuriated Wennington.”

“I'm sorry... I... I didn't mean to hide it!” Tears were welling up in the girl's eyes.

Richard smiled slightly and patted her shoulder, “It's fine. We Archerons aren't known for enduring humiliation. The Mensas have succeeded in infuriating me.”

“Servant!” he suddenly raised his volume.

A servant entered the study room, and Richard immediately instructed him to call Gangdor and Fuschia over, as well as inform Flowsand, Nyris, and Agamemnon to get to the duelling arena within half an hour.

“Oh, tell them there's going to be a show. They'll miss it if they're late,” he added. The servant ran out like lightning.

## Book 3, Chapter 130 - Stakes

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Venica wanted to say something, but she didn't dare to open her mouth. She could already tell that Richard was determined to act, but she worried for his safety. After all, the Archerons weren't like the Mensas. There wasn't a single saint on the island save for Fuschia, while the Mensa island had at least one level 20 overseer.

Richard didn't seem enraged, nor did he shout. All this while, he had been extremely calm. Yet, for some reason, the fiery girl felt extremely scared of him right now. It was an indescribable feeling, one she could not explain.

"The next time something like this happens," Richard suddenly spoke up, "don't shoulder it on your own. Remember to tell me."

She bit her lip and hesitated, "But..."

"I know," he smiled. "You're an Archeron, you want to work alone. That's fine, but wait until you've really grown up."

Gangdor and Richard had built a powerful bond over their time in Faust. When the brute appeared, he even had an enchanted box on his back with some unknown items inside. Fuschia, on the other hand, seemed completely bewildered.

When they walked out of the teleportation formation, Richard suddenly remembered something and asked Venica, "By the way, how old is Young Mensa, and how strong is he?"

She thought it over for a bit, "He should be 21 this year, a level 14 mage."

Richard nodded, "Not half bad. This should be a little interesting!"

A short while later, they were at the top floor of the inn next to the duelling arena. Young Mensa had already booked out the entire floor, his friends and followers everywhere. It wasn't just Mensas here; Richard recognised Foster, Lunor's student, amongst the

faces, and there was also the young Micah from the Schumpeter Family.

He scanned through the area, stroking his short moustache as he smiled, “Everyone who has a beef with me is here, huh.”

Nobody noticed Gangdor’s eyes flashing. He had followed Richard for a long time, and knew the meaning behind all of his master’s subconscious movements. Touching the moustache was an indication of killing intent.

Richard’s own gaze landed on Wennington. His brother’s body was covered with blood as he lay fainted on the ground, a youth with an icy expression having a foot on his head. He didn’t need a detection spell to know that this was Duke Mensa’s youngest son; the brand new injury to his nose was enough.

He moved forward until he was five metres away before crossing his arms, “Enough. I’m here now, so retract that leg. There’s already a fair number of people here and none of them are fools; you’re only stepping on old Mensa’s face.”

Young Mensa’s expression immediately steeled. Richard’s reaction was completely out of his expectations, leaving him at a loss. He eventually retracted his leg and smirked, “Who knew your mouth was even more amazing than your runes. If you want to end up in a better state than he did, you’d best learn to curb your tongue.”

“I’m actually best at killing,” Richard laughed, “I’ll let you try yourself later!”

Young Mensa’s eyes immediately brimmed with bloodlust.

Basically every great family in Faust had a representative in this inn. It seemed like the Mensas were determined to make a huge fuss over this. However, not everyone here was planning to watch the drama; there were also many on Richard’s side, like Nyris and Agamemnon.

However, Nyris looked terrible, glaring at a youth opposite him, “Third Brother, why are you here?”

The young man in ordinary clothing was his older brother, the Emperor’s third son. He flashed a cold smile in Nyris’ direction, “If you can come, why can’t I?”

Nyris looked around and turned even paler, “Did you incite all of this?”

The Third Prince rolled his shoulders, “Don’t say that, I can’t take on such a heavy responsibility. This is a conflict between the Mensa youth and that little Archeron. I was just passing by, so I came here to take a look. See, Second Brother is here as well.”

Nyris’ eyes narrowed as he looked at where the Third Prince had pointed. Just as he had said, a fair and plump youth who looked rather ordinary was in the corner, seeming completely harmless as he seated himself on a chair from who-knew-where. Seeing Nyris’ gaze fall upon him, the corners of his mouth drew back into a dazzling smile. This youth had no presence at all, causing practically everyone to subconsciously overlook him. Only when the Third Prince pointed him out did Nyris notice that there was someone sitting in the corner.

However, this plump youth caused even Agamemnon to grow serious. This was Neil, Emperor Philip’s second son and the prince with an absolute lead in the race for the throne. The Second Prince was the one was most similar to the Emperor, not only in appearance but also in temperament. If someone felt he would be easy to bully, that person would be left not far from death. Nobody had seen Neil act in the past year, but one year ago a saint who hadn’t known his identity had clashed with him in a tavern over a woman. That saint had been left gravely injured. The only conclusion one could draw was that being a saint was far from enough to adequately describe Neil’s strength.

With three princes present, things grew extremely complicated.

With Flowsand, Noelene, and Jacqueline here as well, the two great powers of the royal family and the Church of the Eternal Dragon were both present. At least on the surface, things would have to follow Faust's rules.

Young Mensa crossed his arms and kicked Wennington towards Richard, stating arrogantly, "I can give this fellow to you first, deal with the aftermath. However, he humiliated me and must agree to my request for a duel. I'm not going to cancel it, be prepared to receive a corpse."

Richard started the Mensa youth in the eyes and suddenly smiled, "Why go through all this trouble? You want me, no? Then just get to the point. I'll duel you."

A chilly glint appeared in Young Mensa's eyes, revealing a bit of delight which he immediately suppressed, "These are your words."

A tall youth behind him sneered, "Even if you want a duel, it'll have to wait till this one is over."

Richard looked at the fellow as though he was an idiot, not caring for any courtesy as he directly cast a detection spell on him. This was so rude the tall youth grew furious, wanting to say something, but Richard interrupted him, "So, a level 12 mage. Fine, tell me your relationship with old Mensa; if you're close enough, I can consider duelling you for warmup. If you aren't, then just bloody scram! What's worthless scum like you doing here, making all this noise?"

Richard's words grew more scathing the more he spoke, causing the youth to take half a step backwards involuntarily. He immediately realised what had happened, turning purple, but with so many nobles around he had to maintain a minimal amount of poise. Still, his voice held an unconcealable tremor within it, "I am Duke Mensa's grandnephew, son of Viscount Redpine. I am a titled knight, is that enough?"

Richard immediately nodded, "Of course! As long as you have

Mensa blood in you, that's good enough. Let's duel in a bit."

The young man froze. He hadn't expected to fight Richard; with both being level 12, it was hard to tell who would win. The Archerons and Mensas had a blood feud between them, but that was with Gaton and the Duke. The other Mensas didn't have enough of a bad relationship with Alice, Sauron, and the rest that they were willing to initiate a war. This youth didn't want to die for Young Mensa either; after all, he still had a great future as a potential grand mage.

Richard took in the hesitance of the young man and immediately burst into laughter, saying loudly, "Seems like the so-called honour and courage of the Mensas means only having the guts to duel people of a lower level!"

A dozen Mensa youths instantly paled, the Duke's son's eyes looking to spit fire. Richard's statement was a resounding slap to all their faces; if they did not retaliate, even the Duke would not be able to raise his head from the shame.

"Frodo, agree to it!" Young Mensa shouted sternly.

The young man called Frodo looked just as terrible as the rest. He had only wanted to show off a bit to get further in life; who knew that Richard would drag him down so easily. He wasn't stupid and knew that Richard would use him to establish his prowess.

Richard's gaze finally landed on Young Mensa and he smiled slightly, "Next is what happens between us. If you wish for a duel with me, it's not enough to just let Wennington go."

Young Mensa's gaze grew cold, "What other requirements do you have?" He had realised a battle of words would be pointless, so he decided to get straight to the point. Frodo was likely not a match for Richard, but at least he would reveal Richard's strength and use up a part of his mana.

Richard's gaze went past him to land on an exceptionally

beautiful young lady in the crowd. She had a lavish arrogance to her temperament, but still was as cold as ice. Her beauty would shine through even in a horde of pretty girls, an aspect in which she even exceeded Flowsand slightly. Of course, that did not mean she could compare to Flowsand's aura.

The young lady's ivory-like skin and idol-like features were famed in Faust, and Richard had heard of them before. He gave her a slight bow and smiled, "This must be the beautiful Lady Rosie, yes?"

"Very well!" his gaze landed on Young Mensa, "If you want a battle to the death with me, it's quite simple. Add her to the stakes; if I win, Rosie must strip for me."



## Book 3, Chapter 131 - Steamroll

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The Mensa Family instantly went into an uproar, many condemning Richard. However, they weren't the only ones complaining. Micah Schumpeter grew especially agitated, "Miss Rosie is already betrothed to my family's head! Richard, this is a blatant insult to the Schumpeter Family, I'll kill you!"

The moment the words left his lips, there was no shortage of young nobles encouraging him. He charged straight towards Richard, intending to begin then and there, but a powerful figure blocked his advance. The youth had taken no more than two steps before Gangdor grunted audibly, staring at him with the same disdain one held for a rabbit. Micah may have been level 15, but as far as Gangdor was concerned someone without the slightest hint of a bloodline was just a weakling wishing for death.

Fuschia moved calmly towards Richard's left. Her beauty and skill were both well known in Faust, and just as expected the unruly youngsters immediately decided to back off. It was clearly impossible for them to overpower a level 19 powerhouse. And with his supporters gone, Micah didn't dare to rush towards his death.

Richard didn't bother looking at everyone else, staring at Young Mensa icily, "You should know a duel can only proceed if both sides have the same status, or the superior will send a subordinate to fight on their behalf. I am a royal runemaster. What gives someone with no significant title to speak of the right to duel me?"

Young Mensa grew incredibly sombre. Richard was speaking the truth, but the way it was said felt like a hard slap to the face.

"Some royal runemaster you are," Foster suddenly jeered from the side, "You can't even craft a grade 3 rune."

Richard turned around to look him over up and down, unable to help a laugh as he shook his head, "Are you that eager to give your master a new archenemy? If I were Lunor, I would carefully

consider your motives.”

Foster was left at a loss for words. Looking around, he saw the Third Prince clearly irritated; his heart skipped a beat. While the royal family was dissatisfied with Lunor, they did not wish for an open war between the two royal runemasters. A country as large as the Sacred Alliance could never have enough runemasters. He found himself hating his big mouth. Richard was distasteful, but that was a rivalry for his master to participate in.

“You’ll be throwing your brother’s life away if you refuse to duel,” the Mensa youth made one final attempt. However, he couldn’t help but feel extremely anxious at the calm tone of Richard’s response, “I will avenge him.”

Richard wasn’t just the royal runemaster; it was quite likely that he would become a saint runemaster in the future. Someone like that wouldn’t find it difficult to strip a duke of his rule, even if said duke hailed from a powerful family.

Young Mensa tilted his head slightly, exchanging glances with the Third Prince who nodded to make his decision for him. He had come prepared to win today. It would be completely unacceptable for a level 14 mage to back down from a duel against a level 12.

“Very well,” he declared, “I agree to your terms.”

Rosie wanted to say something, but she eventually decided against it. She was beautiful, but her level 8 strength as a mage wasn’t nearly enough for her to be able to control her fate. Her only worth to the Mensas was in her status and body, as a tool for political marriages. Her personal honour was worth nothing compared to matters like merging with the Schumpeters and eliminating an archenemy like Richard. The Mensa youth was actually rejoicing secretly at Richard’s demand; it was just that he couldn’t accept without any hesitation in front of so many people.

Next came the matters of the duel contract, arranging for the arena, and other related matters. Richard found a place to sit and

waited calmly; trivial matters like that would be left to the subordinates. Wennington had also been treated by the Church, his injuries now under control. He didn't dare to meet Richard's gaze, standing alongside Venica behind him with his head lowered. He had finally realised the entire incident was a plot against Richard; he had been nothing but bait.

Richard was now preparing to duel, and two people consecutively at that. Wennington felt as though the sky would collapse upon him. Richard had already proven his unparalleled talent at runecrafting; given time, he would forge a great reputation for himself. It was no exaggeration to say Richard could single-handedly support the entire Archeron family in the future. Even the most powerful of families thought twice before offending a saint runemaster. But because of his own recklessness, that talent was left with no choice but to enter an unfavourable fight.

Richard seemed to sense the thoughts of his siblings, "Don't worry too much, we Archerons don't always do things rationally."

Nyris and Agamemnon were silently discussing things on the other side of the room.

"Don't you feel like Richard has grown very aggressive with his return this time?" Nyris asked silently.

Agamemnon nodded after a moment's thought.

"Also," the Prince hesitated, unable to help but lower his voice further, "It seems like he's starting to resemble that sister of yours."

Agamemnon's eyes widened as he studied Richard's figure for a long time, "That... I pray not."

"Mm, I agree. Even a handful of people like Beye is more than enough."

It took an hour for all the formalities to be completed. This duel was very important, far beyond the rivalry of two powerful

families. It involved the Schumpeters and the royal family, shaking all of Faust. Every family sent their delegates to spectate, with Duke Mensa and the Schumpeter patriarch even attending personally. The officers in charge reserved the most extravagant arena possible, with the best available amenities. It could accommodate nearly a thousand spectators, with dozens of private viewing boxes.

Duels were a spectacle amongst the aristocracy, a melting pot of honour, blood, strength, and resolve. Their ability to entrance the viewers was unparalleled.

There would be two rounds. The first would be between Frodo Mensa and Richard, while the second would be against the Duke's youngest son. Richard would have half an hour between the rounds for rest and recovery, the duels fought with magic on complicated terrain with rocks and trees.

To the surprise of everyone, Emperor Phillip himself graced the event with his presence. This was the time for His Majesty's afternoon tea; for him to forego a meal spoke volumes of how important this duel was. Unfortunately, his expression told everyone that his mood was less than ideal. Still, that was understandable. No ruler of a country would be pleased when a royal runemaster entered a duel with someone. His Majesty was known to be an accomplished schemer; after this event, whoever had displeased him would face terrifying consequences.

With the Emperor present, the Third Prince naturally went to his box and stood behind him.

Cheers erupted from within the arena as both Richard and Frodo entered. Philip gazed upon the youths entering from opposing ends and grunted, speaking in a slightly nasal voice, "The Mensa lads did really well this time. They took the chance to attack Richard's weakness and exploited the rules to force him into this position. Quite clever.

“But not wise enough,” he finished as he shifted his mountainous body, voice containing a hint of sternness that was difficult to detect. His words seemed to have a hidden meaning that jogged the Third Prince’s thoughts.

Frodo was the archetype of a mage, decked out from head to toe in magic equipment. He was wearing two rings, a belt, a robe, boots, and a necklace that were all superior-grade equipment, greatly amplifying his power. An unusually robust foundation was put on display the moment the duel began as he chose his position appropriately, erecting barriers and readying himself to counterattack. Everything was meticulous while his chants were clear and swift, his figure the very model of a future grand mage.

In stark contrast, Richard had no equipment as he stepped into the arena bare-handed. He just sneered icily as he stood still, watching Frodo add layer after layer of shield spell onto himself. Only when the enemy was done did he slowly raise his hand.

As Frodo prepared to start his attack, a gust of hot air started rising around Richard. His short hair started swaying in the wind as he muttered a short chant, a fireball forming between his palms and immediately flying towards the enemy.

Frodo was shocked. Richard’s first spell being this fast was completely unexpected. Had he devoted his time to learning to insta-cast a fireball? Did he really think a mere grade 3 spell could defeat a level 12 mage?

The flames engulfed the mage, but a magical light shone within until the spell flickered out. Frodo remained standing in his position, but was visibly shaken. Richard’s fireball was unnaturally powerful, eliminating half of his barrier in one go. But then he looked up, only to see a second fireball hurtling towards him.

How could he be this fast?! Frodo cried out in shock before being engulfed in flames once more. The raging explosions drowned his

voice out in an instant, fireball after fireball shooting towards his position every second. Even a grade 3 spell could cause great damage when stacked so heavily. The cumulative power of Richard's barrage was enough to even give a saint some pause.

Richard cast a total of eight fireballs before stopping. About fifty metres away, there was nothing left of his opponent but a smouldering corpse. Even the magic equipment had been unable to withstand the volley, burnt completely to ashes. Frodo had already been killed by the sixth, but Richard had only been satisfied after sending two more his way. The audience couldn't help but find the scene unsettling.

The grand mage presiding over the contest was stunned, to the point that he forgot to verify if Frodo was alive. The entire arena went deathly silent, many subconsciously holding their breaths as the last eight seconds played on repeat in their minds. There was no shortage of nobles in that arena who were well-versed in magic; they had seen many magic duels, even those between grand mages. However, none of them had witnessed an event like this. Richard had only used a single spell from the start, annihilating his opponent with unending flames.

Unavoidable and relentless. It was a crude tactic, but it radiated the destructive power of heat.

Richard didn't bother waiting for the announcement of his victory, turning towards Young Mensa who was amongst the audience and grinning icily, "You're up next, Mr. Mensa."

All colour drained from the Mensa youth's face, "You'd rather waste time here than recover your mana? You do realise you have no more than half an hour." Hidden away from everyone's view, the youth's left hand was shaking uncontrollably within his sleeves. He was sweating so profusely his clothes were visibly wet.

Richard spread his hands and smiled joyously, "No need, five minutes is enough. I just need to change my clothes."

The youth felt offended and humiliated, but the declaration also relaxed him greatly. Another layer of sweat appeared on his body as he started fearing that Richard would take it back, and he immediately yelled out, “Very well! You had better not regret this!”

Young Mensa immediately felt innumerable gazes upon him, every one stinging hard. The nobles were whispering to each other, shocked at his unexpected weakness and lack of grace. He felt an immediate rush of shame, but quickly reassured himself. So long as the duel was won, nothing else was of consequence. A mana restoration potion would give one enough mana to cast a grade 6 spell within half an hour. Richard had unleashed eight consecutive fireballs, he should have lost at least a third of his mana.

“Fetch my equipment!” Young Mensa shouted as he stood up.

Several attendants from the Mensa Family emerged, opening a bunch of boxes in front of the nobles. Arrayed within were six pieces of equipment, half of which were epic-grade gear. One of them was a long magic staff bound in gold and white, a lifelike six-winged serpent coiled around the tip.

“The Plumed Windsnake Staff!” someone from the crowd gasped. This was a renowned heirloom of the Mensa Family, nearly reaching legendary might.

## Book 3, Chapter 132 - One Hit Kill

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The Plumed Windsnake had a grade 3 barrier, a grade 2 cast speed buff, and an elementary damage buff. This allowed its user to set up their defences on a moment's notice, preparing for a battle of affinities and mana pools. Providing a boost to spell penetration, cast speed, and magic damage, the staff had established its reputation as an excellent weapon for mages.

It was quite clear that the Mensas had prepared for this battle. Young Mensa was already two levels higher than Richard, and armed to the teeth as he was the audience saw only one outcome in this battle. Everyone knew that the Archerons were dirt poor, that Gaton had built his family up from almost nothing. They were known as the only powerful family in Faust without any legendary weapons, but of course it was hard to call them powerful now either. Richard didn't have any time to prepare; even if he wanted to borrow from his allies, it would be lucky to even get epic gear within this short period of time.

Mensa specifically prepared for the battle in the open so he could add on to the pressure Richard was facing. Battles between mages always held an element of uncertainty to them; even confident in his win, he wanted to disrupt Richard's state of mind and force mistakes.

It didn't take long for Richard to appear from the changing rooms, crossing paths with Young Mensa. Dressed in his epic gear, the youth drew close to Richard and waved the staff in his hands, "See the Plumed Windsnake? You're dead!"

Richard remained uncaring as he appraised the staff, saying meaningfully, "Not bad."

Young Mensa raised his voice once more, his expression serious, "I'll be waiting for you on the battlefield." He then took big steps towards the arena, not bothering about the fact that Frodo's corpse



was still being cleaned up. Richard smiled; he knew this opponent was afraid of him spending time to recuperate.

Inside the Emperor's booth, Nyris was enraged. "This is ridiculous!" he shouted.

Second Prince Neil smiled innocently, as though he had no thoughts on the matter. On the other hand, the Third Prince stared coldly at his brother as he spoke sardonically, "The winner takes all, the loser has no right to complain."

Nyris just smirked at that, with no intentions of meeting the provocation. It was Emperor Philip who actually turned around, "All of you will meet such opponents in the future. Think of how you would face them."

The three princes nodded their heads, stopping all conversation. Richard was once again the centre of all attention as he walked towards Gangdor, a simple gesture telling the brute of his intentions. A magic chest was placed on the ground and opened, revealing its contents.

Richard first took out a necklace and wore it, before pulling out a staff that looked ancient. He finally drew a long blade and placed it on his back.

The staff Richard was holding was rather unique. Although it wasn't as flashy as the Plumed Windsnake, the fallen angel wing on its head was far more memorable.

"Twin of Destiny! It's a Twin of Destiny!" someone shouted from the crowd.

The audience immediately erupted. The Twins of Destiny were said to have been used by high priestess Ferlyn of the Church of the Eternal Dragon. They had accompanied her on her journey through the myriad planes, establishing a great reputation. Ferlyn was also known as the two-faced mirror, equally skilled at both healing and offence.

Someone also recognised the long blade on Richard's back. However, compared to the Twin of Destiny the Schumpeter Family's heirloom was nothing. Only when Extinction and Annihilation were together did they achieve legendary strength.

Although the Twin of Destiny in Richard's hands was only one half of a whole as well, just the fallen angel staff was much more powerful than the Plumed Windsnake. The Holy Angel was unsuited for mages anyway.

Already in the arena, Young Mensa grew upset. Thankfully Richard took no breaks, not even drinking a mana potion before he walked in.

Young Mensa held tightly onto his staff, constantly reminding himself that it wasn't too much weaker than the Twin of Destiny. He was also a good two levels stronger than Richard; even ignoring the Plumed Windsnake, the Twin of Destiny would only be able to narrow the gap between them. Was Richard right, did he not have the courage to fight a fair battle? Only now did the youth realise just how terrified he was.

And yet, he didn't know why. Every statistic assured him that his chances of winning were over 90%. In fact, it was a flip of a coin whether he would even suffer any significant injuries at all. Richard had even gone through an additional battle just before and exhausted eight fireballs' worth of mana. WHY WAS HE AFRAID?

The steamroll against Frodo was likely what had resulted in the shock, the youth consoled himself. How could such a thing be repeated again? Maybe he was just afraid of Richard's momentum.

Richard entered the battlefield and walked towards Young Mensa, only stopping when they were thirty metres apart as per the standard agreement. Emperor Philip's stare grew sharper when he noticed the gait.

Young Mensa laid his eyes on the sword on Richard's back, forcing himself to act relaxed as he asked, "I've never encountered

a mage carrying a blade to the battlefield. Can you tell me why?”

Richard flashed a malicious smile, “I’ll tell you after the battle is over!”

On the viewing platform, Duke Mensa turned to Duke Schumpeter and smiled, “The blade on Richard’s back comes from your family, no?”

Dario sighed heavily in anger, “It’s all because of Sinclair, that useless thing!”

Duke Mensa remained relaxed, “It’s alright, it will return to its rightful owner in some time.”

The gates of the arena were then closed, the referee walking to one of the corners and giving the signal to begin. Richard’s smile immediately melted away, making him seem like an entirely different person.

Philip heaved a prideful sigh, pointing to Richard, “This youth might go even further than Gaton!”

This was a statement that even shocked the Fourth Prince; Nyris hadn’t expected Philip to give Richard such high accolades. Still, he wasn’t confident of Richard’s chances in this battle.

The grand mage pointed his finger upwards, a golden fireball shooting into the sky. The battle had started!

Young Mensa raised his staff immediately, adding extra physical and magic barriers before buffing his speed. However, that still didn’t seem to be enough. He continued to buff himself, finishing within a few seconds what a normal mage would take half a minute to complete.

Richard raised the Twin of Destiny, beginning a chant. The black wing of the staff started to glimmer, and everyone well-versed in magic instantly knew that he was casting a grade 6 spell. This wouldn’t be enough to break through the defences of Young Mensa. This didn’t conform to the standard style of a duel between

mages. If Young Mensa survived the first attack, his reply would be lethal.

A red glow flashed on Richard's face before making its way to the staff. He raised it up, slightly moving it forward. A thick beam of crimson light appeared in the sky, falling down on and engulfing Young Mensa in his entirety.

Time seemed to slow down at that moment. The bolt of blood-lightning weathered away Young Mensa's barriers, his face turning from pale white to raging red before eventually turning black. A powerful ball of fire suddenly came out of Young Mensa's body, burning brightly before dying down in an instant.

Everything had happened too quickly for the audience to respond. BOOM! A thunderous roar suddenly rocked the entire arena, the deafening explosion ringing out in all directions. Anyone with even a basic understanding of magic stood up, shell-shocked. The crimson lightning was still burning brightly in their eyes, an imprint that terrified them to near death.

How could a lightning bolt be so huge? That lightning bolt was beyond the understanding of everyone present, the ultimate destructive force of a grade 8 spell coming out of a grade 6 chant. And yet, it wasn't all destruction; they could feel the power of life within that strike.

Young Mensa was already burnt from head to toe, lying paralysed on the ground. His body was trembling, his ability to battle clearly lost. Outside of the Plumed Windsnake and his other epic gear, everything else on him had been burnt away.

Richard tried his best to overcome the emptiness in his body, steadying his consciousness. The mana within him was almost depleted, sending him down to level 11 in an instant. Far too much of his life force and mana had been depleted for that attack, but it had succeeded in overpowering Young Mensa in one shot.

The referee looked blankly at Richard, but he didn't announce

the results of the battle. A duel could only end if one side died or the winner agreed to stop. Young Mensa was badly injured, but he wasn't dead. Richard took big strides in his opponent's direction.

“DON'T YOU DARE!” Duke Mensa suddenly shouted from the platform.

## Book 3, Chapter 133 - Glory

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Young Mensa's eyes were full of fear and obeisance, but the lightning bolt had left his entire body numb. He couldn't speak a word. Richard slowly drew the sword on his back, "You wanted to know what this sword was for, no? It's to split open your throat."

He then placed the sword on Young Mensa's throat and lightly pressed on it, drawing blood.

A heart-wrenching scream pierced through the sky from one of the viewing platforms, the skies above Richard's head suddenly growing dark and gloomy. An overbearing force fell down from up high, a silhouette heading in Richard's direction. Unprepared as he was, Richard couldn't even move his fingers in the face of this assault. The attacker went beyond the level of a normal saint, reaching legendary might.

Unable to resist, Richard merely shut his eyes in acceptance. It hadn't crossed his mind that the Mensa Family would be so daring, openly flouting the sacred rules right under the Emperor's watch.

'So be it. If I die here, the Mensas won't last more than ten years.' Richard shut his eyes, awaiting his fate. In his last fleeting moments, he thought to himself that at least he had gotten some interest back for Gaton. As for what came after, that wasn't his problem.

BAM! A heavy thud sounded beside Richard, but it wasn't the attack he had been expecting. He lifted his head in suspicion, seeing a bulky man struggling to stand up as he bled profusely from his head. He was puking blood non-stop, unable to even speak properly. The man looked down at his waist, only to find a piece of cake! The cake was embedded deep into his body, still intact, but just looking at its position one could tell that any bones nearby had been smashed to pieces.

Richard looked at the bulky man's face and immediately

identified him as Duke Mensa's brother, Earl Kane Mensa. This level 19 saint was the one trying to attack, but now he lay heavily injured on the ground by a soft cake. Blood continued to gush out of his throat as he was left unable to struggle any longer, falling to the ground.

Something flashed in Richard's head and he turned his head towards the viewing booths. Emperor Philip was wiping the cake crumbs off his fat arms, saying unhappily, "What a waste of my dessert!"

He then stood up, "The fight is over, there's nothing left to see." Just before he stepped out, however, he suddenly thought of something and said to someone beside him, "Stay behind and make sure all of them adhere to the rules of the duel. I don't want anyone challenging Emperor Charles' laws."

"You can rest assured, Your Majesty!" the follower said with determination.

Richard had already stowed his sword away, walking casually towards the exit of the arena. Duke Mensa was already waiting outside, expression stern and voice quivering, "Richard! You... You're good. You're quite good!"

Richard calmly wiped at the blood on his hands, "I've always been good. It seems like your beloved son is the one who isn't."

Duke Schumpeter had a similarly cold look on his face, his eyes narrowed, "Indeed, you're quite good to make enemies of both the Mensas and Schumpeters! But I've seen far too many amazing youths in the past fifty years. All of them eventually become a set of bones. I can only give you one piece of advice; whenever you leave Faust, be sure to watch your back!"

Richard suddenly started laughing out loud as he pointed at Dario, "A mere Schumpeter has the audacity to threaten me?"

The Duke's expression immediately grew wonderful; the

surrounding nobles were making digs at him. If not for the protection of the Mensas, the Schumpeters would already have been chased out of Faust. Duke Mensa was the only reason Dario still possessed his seat.

Richard stopped smiling, casting a piercing gaze in the Duke's direction as he said mellowly, "But that's okay, Your Grace. I won't mind such a small fault. After all, I am going to be helping you check whether Miss Rosie's body is as attractive as her face. I hear you haven't married her yet, so sad!"

Mensa's face warped into a look of insanity. "Richard!" he shouted as he drew his sword in one go, "I'll kill you!"

The sword was drawn, but it could not go through. A pair of fair, feminine hands placed themselves on the Duke's, looking soft and gentle yet completely neutralising old Mensa's level 17 strength. He was left unable to attack or defend.

Mensa grew angry beyond words, but when he looked up it was as though a bucket of cold water had been poured over his head. Seeing the androgynous face in front of him, his anger was frozen in an instant. Anyone with a modicum of knowledge about the royal family would recognise that this was one of Emperor Philip's followers. This person seemed like they could only lick His Majesty's boots, but they had served by Philip's side for more than twenty years, weathering multiple political storms.

"His Majesty has decreed that the rules of the great Charles shall not be broken!" a sharp voice rang out.

Duke Mensa's expression turned from enraged to thoughtfully, "Please rest assured, the Mensa Family has millennia of glory and honour behind it. We will not renege on our promises. Rosie!"

Rosie took a step forward, expressionlessly standing beside the Duke.

Duke Mensa looked at Richard, "The bet was for her to strip for



you. I don't think a third party should be involved, am I right?"

Richard smiled, "Exactly."

"Great! Rosie, head back with Richard for now. Remember to follow his instructions; the Mensas are not a family without honour." The Duke turned around and left the moment he finished his sentence, not bothering with Dario whose face had turned green in discomfort. He didn't even bother to take another look at his own son's dead body.

The entire Mensa Family was no different. They left Rosie alone.

Richard smiled, waiting for Dario and Duke Mensa to leave before signalling to Rosie, "Let's go!"

He gathered his men and headed back towards the floating island, Rosie silently following behind. However, only a few steps into the walk and he felt a weird stare on him. Turning around, he saw a delicate-looking youth staring at him from a small distance away. Seeing Richard look in his direction, he turned away and left in a hurry.

Looking at the receding back, Richard turned towards Fuschia, "Who is that?"

Fuschia was quite familiar with Faust's nobility, "That should be Raymond Joseph, famous for his breadth of knowledge and intellect. He is a rare mage of Solomon, and an aspiring runemaster himself."

"A familiar name; he definitely isn't someone simple. Thankfully, it looks like he isn't long for this world."

Fuschia was instantly shocked. She could tell that Raymond had a weak physique, but it wasn't easy to draw a conclusion like Richard's without more knowledge. She felt like this youth had become a stranger over the span of two duels. But then again, perhaps she had never understood him.

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In an unseen corner, Raymond took out a handkerchief and covered his mouth, coughing heavily. His back trembled in the midst of his fit, the white handkerchief stained crimson by the time he regained control of his body.

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Flowsand was running towards the Church of the Eternal Dragon with heavy footsteps, as though she wanted to crush the marble flooring under her feet. “I shouldn’t have given you the Twin of Destiny!” she muttered through gritted teeth, “You should just have died to that Mensa fellow. You heartless creature!”

Behind her, Noelene forced a smile and pretended she hadn’t heard anything.

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The noble families reluctantly started to leave the arena, most still embroiled in heated discussions about the duels. That crimson lightning bolt was the centre of attention; these battles would definitely capture the minds of the people for a long time.

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Ever since they left for the teleportation temple up till they reached Richard’s study, Rosie silently followed behind Richard without a word. Nobody from the Mensa Family followed her at all, the Duke sending his “beloved” granddaughter into an enemy base by herself.

No matter where she was, Rosie had the beauty and presence to make her the centre of attention. Many even called her the pearl of the Mensa Family. Seeing her follow Richard back to his island, many discussions sprang up between the shocked populace of Faust. Information about the bet between Richard and the Mensas was spread throughout the city in what seemed like an instant.

Back in the library, Richard sent the steward out to bring a bottle of red wine before having everyone return, leaving him alone with

the beauty. Only then did he realise his face was turning an abnormal white. Still, he didn't speak of it and instead calmly chugged down a mana potion. He then opened the bottle of wine calmly, pouring out a glass for himself. He'd only had one glass brought over; he obviously didn't intend to play the part of a good host.

It took quite a bit of time for the mana potion to kick in, allowing him to feel better. Still, he felt a discomfort inside his body that left him empty. Such was the impact of his Archeron bloodline; he didn't know yet that many of his internals had been burnt.

## Book 3, Chapter 134 - Payoff

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Richard spread out a piece of paper on the desk and partitioned it in two with a vertical line. He started writing on the left:

‘Lost more than a level’s worth of mana forever and sustained serious injuries.

‘The enemies now know my strength; next time, they might set a trap or just attack with someone more powerful.

‘The fact that the Archerons have no powerhouses in Faust has been exposed.’

This was a small habit he had picked up. Around every major incident in his life, he was starting to make a note of the gains and losses thoroughly so he could judge the results in an objective fashion. The left side held the price paid, while the right side held the payoff. It took a long period of thought before he actually started filling that side up:

‘Felt great!

‘Defended the Archerons’ dignity and humiliated those two old fellows.

‘Got rid of two pricks.

‘Stripped a beauty naked.’

He pondered seriously and struck out the last two lines very quickly, leaving behind the line about defending the Archerons’ dignity. In his opinion, the other few weren’t really profits at all. However, after endless hesitation, he eventually kept the words ‘Felt great’ in.

Looking at the final state of that piece of paper, Richard actually shook his head and laughed bitterly. A great price had been paid, but the payoff was pathetically small. The defence of his family’s reputation was the only thing that could be considered worth

anything, but even that was in the future and a mere possibility at that.

“Such a great loss,” he said to himself after a long sigh.

Rosie remained standing quietly. Her expression twitched at Richard’s words, but it only took a moment for her to recover her cold pride. Richard raised his head to glance at her, a frown appearing on his face, “What are you still standing there for? Strip!”

The lady’s hands shivered slightly, but she still maintained a tranquil expression as she slowly undid button after button as gracefully as she could. The lace tying her long skirt, petticoat, and undergarments fell to the ground one by one.

Once the last piece of clothing fell to the ground, she took a step forward, revealing herself to Richard completely. Her expression remained undisturbed, but every muscle in her body had gone taut. Her cold face betrayed the perfection of her body, her hands unable to help but try and cover the more sensitive areas of her body.

Richard leaned back into his chair, casually sampling the wine in his glass. His mind had long since been taken away from the alcohol, focused entirely on the beauty before him. Indeed, Rosie’s figure was just as perfect as her face. Her slim waist was a striking contrast to the towering peaks of her breasts, giving way to a pair of long, straight legs. Her bare feet were just as slim and beautiful as her hands, the nails seeming extremely delicate.

She was a beauty through and through, so much so that anyone looking at her would want to take a ferocious bite.

Richard felt a strong flame rushing through his blood, his male instincts stirred irrepressibly; his manhood grew so stiff it was hard to bear. Richard had to admit that Rosie was a special young lady; in terms of looks and figure alone, she was easily the best of all the women he had seen in his life.

In a world where power garnered respect, someone with such meagre strength had become so core to the Mensa Family that they named an entire plane after her. This clearly showed her astonishing charm. However, that wasn't the source of her fatal attraction to Richard. To him, she was the pearl of his enemies, the perfect lover in the dreams of countless Mensa youths. She was also the fiancée of another of his enemies, Duke Dario. Both these identities left him with the urge to violate her.

Richard suddenly felt a little pity, thinking he should have added a line about using her as he wished in the bet. Or perhaps he could simply have demanded she be given to him. Given the situation at that time, all chances were that Young Mensa would have agreed to such a bet. After all, there was supposed to be no chance of losing at all. The Mensa Family's only worry was that Richard would be able to bear not taking part in the duel and watching Wennington die.

Wennington was an outstanding young man, but that was all. He had a certain amount of potential, but it wouldn't be possible for him to become someone like Richard who could reverse the fate of the entire family. In Duke Mensa's eyes, even if the decision-making was left to the Archeron elders it was quite likely that he would be abandoned. It wasn't even expected amongst the nobility to sacrifice oneself for their blood. Richard and Wennington even had different mothers; the latter's only value to the former was in the Archerons' dignity.

"Hands down," Richard said as he gently sipped the wine. Rosie hesitated, her hands dropping a little before springing back into place. He saw the thin hairs on the surface of her body standing.

Still, the young lady seemed to realise her fate. She eventually put both hands down, exposing all her privates. Richard stood up and walked over to her, examining her closely before reaching out to raise her chin, "Do you know what I'm feeling right now?"

Forced to look up, Rosie responded in a calm and indifferent

voice, “Yes. Every time you touch me, you feel like you’ve slapped the two old dukes of both the Mensas and Schumpeters.”

The reply was shockingly accurate, to the extent that Richard’s gaze at her warped. “Damn right!” he said after a while, the hand he used to raise her chin gradually moving down along the curves of her body.

Rosie suddenly shook, biting her lower lip. Richard looked at her beautiful blue eyes as his hands continued downwards, saying slowly, “I’ll never get tired of slapping them this way. However, do you have no intentions of resisting? This isn’t a part of the bet.”

Rosie suddenly shivered, sighing at the question, “I know, but I also know what you will take this to if I resist. I don’t want that.”

“Oh?” Richard stopped his hands, asking with curiosity, “Say, which step do you think I want to take this to? Guess correctly and I’ll consider the bet complete.”

Rosie gently bit her lower lip, looking at him with a complicated gaze. She eventually came to a decision, “I heard about your sister. After losing the bet, she... She had to help them see clearly according to their requests, so she had no choice but to make different poses. She also had to reveal certain parts herself... I don’t want that.”

There was a slight stir in Richard’s heart. Rosie and Venica were actually quite similar, both doing their best to resist just in different ways. One chose to take the initiative, while the other chose to remain passive. One would rather endure humiliation than allow someone else to so much as touch her finger, while the other didn’t want him to enjoy the victory of conquering her. In the battle to the death between these two large families, the stories young ladies like them often ended up as tragedies.

Faust, with its rather rigid laws, was a paradise within the hell that was Norland. Duke Mensa and his younger brother trying to attack Richard after the duel was considered extremely abnormal,

only happening because of the threat he posed. Outside of Faust, Venica would not have gotten away with just stripping. It was the same for Rosie as well. Compared to the number of lives lost in war, their experiences were far too light to be worth anything at all.

Richard had waded through the infernal hell that was planar war for more than a year already; these kinds of matters could only shake his mood a little. Still, Richard had to admit that Rosie was quite special, be it clothed or otherwise.

“Alright, you guessed right. The bet is considered complete, you can wear your clothes.” He waved his hand, taking two steps back and sitting on the edge of his table.

Although he’d let her off at last, Richard still wouldn’t miss the wonderful scene of her wearing her clothes. The blessing of truth came into use at that moment, allowing him to store every bit of this scene in his consciousness. As a master artist, he could draw up any moment from memory.

Rosie’s movements were calm, elegant and refined. She treated Richard like he was air, not behaving like she was being watched at all. Seeing her put on the last piece of clothing, Richard shrugged in disappointment and felt a twinge of regret. However, for the sake of his reputation, he certainly would not express his current feelings. Although he had intended to use her to attack the Mensas and Schumpeters, the matter itself wasn’t worth much. That could be seen from the rewards listed on that piece of paper that was still on the desk. Still, he had no choice but to admit that Rosie herself had been a great reward.

He turned back to the paper and made a few strokes, calculating that it would take him less than a month to recover to level 12 and another year to get to level 13. However, that was under the assumption that he would be directing all the astral rays he could to strengthen his elven bloodline.



He then started to look at how fast he could level up if he went all out. This wasn't a very complicated problem, but because it involved the probabilities of the many grades of astral rays appearing and his chances of capturing them, he needed pen and paper as well as a simple magic array to perform the calculations. He rapidly outlined the sketch in his mind and started to write it out, but then he realised that Rosie was still in his study. He lifted his head and saw the young lady standing quietly in one corner of the room, looking at him with her deep blue eyes.

He frowned, "You're not going back. Don't tell me you want an escort or something... Or do you wish to take things further between us?"

## Book 3, Chapter 135 - A Third Ending

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Richard wasn't inexperienced with women anymore, and certainly wasn't lacking in partners either. Given his strength, identity, and status, be it in Norland or Faelor he could have as many women as he wanted. And given his increasing power and influence, it wouldn't be hard to court women like Rosie in the future either.

The very fact that Duke Mensa had used Rosie as a bargaining chip with the Schumpeters was proof enough that she was worth less than a broken family. Richard wasn't worth as much as Dario right now, but even in the near future that would be vastly different. That was something even the rest of Faust's nobles had to acknowledge.

However, Rosie was truly special. She had broken many perceptions of her, including his own. His original plan had been to humiliate and violate her ruthlessly; in his quest to humiliate the Mensas and Schumpeters, he had resolved himself to fall as far as was needed.

She stood still under his sharp gaze, expressing no intent to leave. Richard's expression turned cold, "Do you really want to do the deed with me? I certainly won't reject it."

Rosie sighed, "Richard, do you really want to let me go back?"

"What else?" Richard asked in reply.

"Have you thought it through? Do you know what me returning now will end in?" she asked softly.

"Just your reputation being destroyed, isn't it?"

A bitter smile emerged on Rosie's face, "How could it be so simple? Dario was absolutely humiliated after this bet. According to regular practices, he should break his engagement and send me back to my family as a disgrace. I'll just become a plaything in the

family, my body a currency used to exchange for whatever they want.

“But Dario might not do that. He can’t get out of being annexed by the Mensas anyway, so he’ll proceed and might even have the marriage brought forward. I’ll likely suffer all sorts of humiliation and mistreatment in the Schumpeter Family... You... If you ask around, you’ll quickly learn that Dario is in the habit of torturing girls to death. If I return now, there are only two endings for me: as a toy for the Mensas or a toy for the Schumpeters.”

Richard had to admit that this was quite possible. Venica was quite different; her bet was still mostly secret, and at least nominally, her brother was the current family head. Richard had no intention of devolving into such a level of carnality that his sister would turn into a toy for his family. Of course, all sorts of people existed amongst the nobility; it wasn’t rare for such things to happen.

Seeing Richard not saying anything, Rosie looked at him and gently sighed, “Why me?”

“You just happened to be there,” Richard laughed while spreading his hands. However, he immediately grew serious, “Because you’re the best way to attack the Mensas and Schumpeters at the same time, especially the latter. When attacking your opponents, it’s best to dispose of the dogs first.”

“Indeed... But I’d like to ask, can I choose a third ending?”

“A third ending?” Richard was somewhat surprised once more, “Tell me.”

“Let me stay,” Rosie said without the slightest hesitation.

Richard’s expression did not change, “Stay? As whom?”

The young lady’s voice was calm yet resolute, “Anyone. Maid, prisoner, refugee... Lover, bedwife, anything is fine. However, I’ll only accept you. Let someone else touch me and I will kill myself;

that would be no different from returning.”

Richard’s expression grew helpless with a trace of ridicule, “You don’t want to become a toy for the Mensas and Schumpeters but you want to become mine? It seems like I brought trouble back with me. Alright, let’s talk about your real thoughts. Why do you think I should let you stay here?”

She hesitated for a moment, “I’m smart. I also know some magic, and even have an awakened bloodline ability. I hope to be able to obtain a position through these things, not with my face and body.”

Richard smiled, “Ambitious, but unrealistic. Try again!”

Rosie paled, clenching her teeth, “Fine, add in my face and body.”

He finally nodded, “That’s more like it. Alright, you qualify for my protection. You can leave for now, I’ll have the steward arrange a place for you to stay in the castle. I have to return to Faelor tomorrow, I’ll think of how to use you the next time I’m back.”

“You can bring me to Faelor with you,” Rosie answered.

Richard sized her up, speaking indifferently, “I don’t want to take a burden with me. It’s very expensive to travel between planes, everyone knows we Archerons are poor.”

Having said that, he rang the bell nearby to summon the butler, instructing the man to find a place for her to stay and not release her no matter who wanted it. He then had the two leave.

The study finally quieted down. Richard sat in front of the table and began planning his next steps back in Faelor.

His first order of business was to sort out this journey’s results. He had gained 7 million gold from the maple amber and 3 million from the rune sets, with more coming from the ores and ingots. All in all, this was exchanged for slightly more than ten million in

weapons and equipment, with the rest of the money handed over for the butler to maintain the island and Archeron territories with. 400 obsidian weapons were given to the enchanters, and in exchange for a hundred of them, he would have an entire 300 epic-grade weapons in a month's time.

The profits from this trip were sufficient for him to arm a thousand elite knights. At least for the near future, he wouldn't have to worry about equipment. Even counting the 200 knight equipment sets he had sold to Bevry, Richard still had 800 remaining sets in his hands. This was nearly 200 days' worth of the broodmother's drones.

However, Richard's process in calculating these profits was extremely slow. Rosie's figure flashed in his mind from time to time, the scenes risque enough to have one spit blood. The impact of her stripping was impossible to rid himself of so quickly, leaving him extremely inefficient.

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Around the same time, Raymond Joseph was sitting at a window seat in a quiet bar in Faust, looking at the half-moon shift slowly across the sky as he gulped down a mouthful of bitter alcohol. The concentrated liquor burnt like fire, blazing all the way down his throat to his stomach.

Just as he was about to pour another large cup, a hand suddenly stretched out and pressed down on his own. Raymond wasn't drinking alone; the person opposite him dressed in a hooded robe that covered half her face. "Stop drinking," a slightly hoarse voice rang out, "Do you want to die in a few years?"

Raymond flashed a smile of defeat, "Compared to dying, isn't it much more painful to be alive right now?"

"You could have intervened today," the mysterious woman said slowly.

“Intervened? How? Even if I could stop Richard, I would just have to send Rosie back to the Mensas again. Should I have let her fall into the hellhole that was the Schumpeter Family?” Raymond’s eyes turned red as he roared softly like a weakened beast. Even though he was reeking of alcohol and couldn’t even speak clearly, his voice was still low enough to only be heard by the woman opposite him.

Such was his life. Even if he wanted to drown his sorrows in alcohol, his body always gave way before his mind. His consciousness would always be awake.

He broke away from the woman’s hands a little rudely, drinking more than half a cup of the hard liquor in one gulp before spitting out a breath that reeked, “I understand her, just like she understands me. She’s a smart girl; I know she’ll find a way to stay on the Archeron island once she gets there. Regardless of who she ends up becoming there, it’s still better than returning to that old pervert’s side.”

The mysterious woman looked at him drinking up another cup, “I can help you.”

“Help me? You’re insane!” Raymond laughed in desolate grief, “Look at what happened to Kane! The Emperor finally revealed one of his fangs. Isn’t his opinion clear enough? He didn’t allow anyone to interfere with the bet, forcing them to carry it through to the end with his family’s dignity. Don’t tell me you want to confront Bloodthirsty Philip.”

The mysterious woman was left speechless. The face hidden under the hood looked very young, at most around the same age as Raymond himself. Youths like them, regardless of how talented they were, could not disobey a colossus like the Emperor.

After venting his anger, Raymond seemed to calm down a little. He heaved a long sigh, “The bottom line is that I don’t have the power to protect her. If I could take full control of the family,

perhaps I could change her fate. However, no sane family would go to war with the Mensas for a child that only has a few years left to live. I don't even have any worth as a bargaining chip anymore."

"Destiny can be changed! There's still time, we can go now!"

"It's already too late," Raymond said with a shake of his head, looking out of the window and sighing for the hundredth time, "Actually, this might be the chance she needs to change her destiny. I can't achieve her dreams, but perhaps Richard can..."

A gush of wind blew past the bar as Raymond uttered those words. Even in Faust where all four seasons were spring, it caused one to feel endlessly bleak.

## Book 3, Chapter 136 - Longing

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“I can get her out!” the mysterious woman emphasised once more.

Raymond looked at her, speaking slowly, “They have Fuschia there right now, alongside the paladins of the Church. You won’t be able to get in and out without leaving any traces; once the issue blows up, His Majesty will definitely find out. You saw how severely injured Kane Mensa was today; you want to snatch Rosie away the same night? Isn’t that a slap in the Emperor’s face? Did you even think of the consequences?”

“What consequences could there be?” the woman said lightly, “He is my father.”

“A father who killed two of your brothers for slighting him!” Raymond howled lowly, “And their offences were certainly not as grave as what you’re planning!”

The mysterious woman fell silent, knowing that his words were true. Bloodthirsty Philip was not easy to anger, but once his temper flared blood was bound to be spilt. Raymond’s voice softened, “Remember this. I won’t let you sacrifice yourself to save another, no matter who she is.”

The mysterious woman opened her mouth, but she did not make any sound. However, the slight tremor of her body showed just how moved she was.

Night slowly fell, the rainbow of the moons beginning to shine. In the dazzling intertwining moonlight, Raymond’s gaze was as deep as the ocean. “We don’t have much time,” he said in a firm yet gentle voice, “The Josephs cannot break their alliance with the Mensas because of me. It doesn’t matter to me whether Rosie falls into Richard’s hands, is married off to Duke Dario, or returns to the Mensa Family; none of those is a good end. But to her, there’s a vast difference. There’s a glimmer of hope by Richard’s side, and



only hell everywhere else.

“So yes, I hope she remains with the Archerons. I hope she can stand beside my enemy.”

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Regardless of the workings of mortal hearts, the rainbow of the moons in Faust's sky always followed the same unchanging orbit. Moons rose and fell, illuminating the sky in their colours for the same duration of time.

On the Archeron island, Richard was standing within the warehouse as he watched the old steward lead a group of people to check box after box of freshly shipped weapons and armour. With over fifty chests, even the ten-odd members of the group took a relatively long time to go through it all.

Having just used Sacrifice, Richard couldn't interact with his mana pool for the time being. Thus, meditation and runecrafting were out of the question. Planning his next steps hadn't taken too much time either, so he was left with some spare time where he had absolutely nothing to do. For some reason, all that appeared in his mind was Rosie's silhouette.

The young lady had surprised him constantly, and now she was an extremely sensitive pawn that affected three large families. The longer she remained on the Archerons' island, the more the dignity of the Mensas and Schumpeters was raked through the mud.

This girl was like a dormant volcano. She was normally silent, even able to allow lakes and grass to grow nearby, but whenever she did open up it was earth-shattering. It was exactly this trait that differentiated her from most others, an addictive characteristic that justified an entire plane being named after her. Although that was partly a means to increase her value as a pawn, her conduct before him proved that she truly did have value beyond her looks.

An attendant handed him a magic sealing box with a few hundred magic crystals lined up within. Richard nodded his head after a simple check, closing the lid once more. These crystals were meant for their journey; any extras would be taken to Faelor for the gate on that end as well as for the broodmother's use.

This time, Richard intended to take at least twenty Archerons and novice knights with him, as well as ten level 10 mages. Thankfully the latest ceremony had dropped the cost to 15,000 per person one-side, but the huge expense still made Richard's heart ache.

But then, the thought of these crystals flooded Richard's mind with a new idea that he could not suppress. He let the attendants continue making preparations and hurried down to the basement; by the time he got to his destination, he was almost running.

Passing through a few heavily guarded doors, he arrived in the depths of the castle where the magic circle for long-distance communication and transfers was present. It was very simple for him to activate it; he skillfully selected the coordinates of the Deepblue and started to insert magic crystals within. When the 109th crystal was inserted, the circle slowly began to light up. The radiant light pulsed, illuminating and darkening the room in a cycle.

It wasn't long before the circle was fully lit, and Richard stood before it and waited patiently.

After a moment, a familiar harried voice rang out, "Who interrupted my work? Damn it, if it wasn't for the fact that this was extremely expensive, I wouldn't have rushed over myself! Say what you want quickly, friend, you must know that gold never sleeps! Every moment wasted is gold coins melted away!"

These were familiar, distinctive words. Richard could almost see the grey dwarf jumping up and down on the other end of the transmission, shouting at the top of his lungs. Surely enough, it

wasn't long before a hologram of Blackgold appeared, holding his head in his hands and staring at him, "You... You... You're... Richard?"

Richard stared blankly, not understanding why Blackgold would be shocked to the point of not even recognising him. "Who else could it be?" he asked, puzzled.

"Why did you get a beard like that?" the grey dwarf shouted, almost jumping.

Richard was stunned once more, touching the uneven beard on his face, "Quite a few dwarves complimented my beard recently. What's so bad about it?"

Blackgold completely exploded, "You could have learnt from anyone, but it had to be from Gaton! That fellow has the same taste as the dwarves, he's someone with no concept of numbers at all! He's just a musclehead, just like the dwarves. What they boast of, we must oppose! What they like, we must cast aside!"

"We?"

"Yes! We! We who are of the Deepblue, a group who understand the true elegance of math and art!" the grey dwarf yelled, as though unbelieving of the question.

It was only then that Richard remembered that the duergar, the grey dwarves, were bitter enemies of their more normal kin. Nearly every time the two races met ended in death. Seeing Blackgold showing no sign of stopping his roars, Richard had no choice but to remind him, "Mr. Blackgold, its very expensive to maintain this link!"

"What does that have to do with me? It's your crystals being burnt anyway!" Blackgold seemed to feel no pain.

On the edge between laughter and tears, Richard responded, "Alright already I need to talk. I heard Master just entered hibernation?"

An unnatural look flashed past the grey dwarf's face, "Yes, Her Excellency has fallen into a deep slumber. She might not wake for a few years."

With his astuteness and perception, there was no way for Richard to miss Blackgold's expression. His heart sank, but he tried to remain calm, "Why?"

"To... restore power. Her Excellency recuperates the fastest when asleep." The grey dwarf had decided to tell the truth.

"Why does she need to restore power? Did she get hurt?"

"That..." Blackgold hesitated for a long time, but eventually responded with a nod, "Sigh, yes."

Richard caught a strange look in his eyes, "It has something to do with me?"

"You could say that," Blackgold forced a smile.

"Specifics!"

Blackgold organised his thoughts, "So... When Her Excellency received the coordinates you sent over, she immediately left for Faelor. There was even a big fight in that plane with an unknown existence and she returned injured. Her Excellency rested a few days before going out once more, but this time it was far worse. She gave us a few instructions and immediately shut herself in, not saying who she'd fought; she only made a vague mention of Faelor. Once she entered repose, us old folks read between the lines. As far as we can tell, her target in the two big battles was likely..." he took in a deep breath, "... the gods of Faelor."

Richard was dumbstruck for a moment, his voice hoarse even when it returned, "Why would Master fight the gods of Faelor?"

The grey dwarf began to wipe his sweat, the image in the magic circle starting to grow unstable as though it had been disturbed.

"Blackgold! Dare to cut off the transmission and I'll come find

you in the Deepblue immediately!”

Richard’s angry shout scared the grey dwarf. It was only at that point that he realised how aggressive this youth had become. Although far from Gaton’s aura that commanded fear, Richard’s rage held a hint of power.

“Alright, but you can’t tell Her Excellency that it was me who told you these things. Of course, what I’m saying now is just speculation. Speculation, got it? Just speculation!

“The first time Her Excellency went to Faelor, she had rushed over the same moment she received the coordinates. She used a beyslace spider crystal to construct a passage directly, and you know such a method normally brings you right outside the plane’s protective sphere. It’s easy to attract the attention of the gods of the plane if you break the walls to enter, just like running to someone’s house and kicking their door open.

“Her Excellency had only left for a short while before she was beaten back, and what chased her through the portal was a surge of divine power! Although she looked to be in a sorry state, her injuries from that weren’t really heavy; with her physique that surpassed a dragon’s, she only needed two days of rest to recover. The injuries were only because she had been too excited, going in unprepared. But the second time, it was different...”

## Book 3, Chapter 137 - Just Want To See Her

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Although he had already decided to tell Richard everything, Blackgold still hesitated for a moment, “What I’m going to say now is entirely my own conjecture, with no conclusive evidence. Don’t take it as gospel.”

“No problem,” Richard agreed, looking relaxed. However, his heart was starting to sink. The scene of the future flashed through his mind repeatedly, Sharon floating in the boundless void.

“I believe Her Excellency was prepared when she went to Faelor for the second time. Her intent was to battle all the gods of the plane and weaken them.” The moment he said this, all strength seemed to leave the grey dwarf’s body.

Everyone knew the greatest enemy in a planar war was the opposing pantheon. Richard knew Faelor had an astonishing number of gods, something the legendary mage should have been able to determine from their first battle. When she returned, she had definitely faced multiple powerful deities.

He took in a deep breath, gazing up at the ceiling in an attempt to force back the warmth in his eyes. “Will I be able to see her?” he asked flatly, “If I come over now?”

The grey dwarf hesitated, “I’m not sure. After Her Excellency entered hibernation, her elven servants have become the highest authority in the Deepblue. None of us are allowed into her level of the tower, but it might be different for you. If she made any special arrangements for it, the puppets should allow you to enter. However, Her Excellency sleeps deeper than a dragon. Even if you go in, you’ll likely just see her asleep. Are you sure about this?”

“That’s fine. I just want to see her. I’ll be there by tomorrow night.”

The power of the magic crystals depleted, the magic circle’s light

gradually dulled to leave Richard shrouded in darkness. He stood there quietly for a moment, his five years in the Deepblue flowing through his mind like water.

But then he suddenly walked out of the transmission room and approached the steward who was in the castle's hall. "Prepare three of our best griffins for flight, I'll be leaving in half an hour."

The old man was surprised, "Now, Young Master? Are you not rushing back to Faelor tomorrow?"

"There's been a change in schedule. I'll take care of things once I'm back, but for now have Gangdor bring the warriors and mages back to Faelor with the equipment... Wait, give this to Flowsand." Even as he spoke, Richard grabbed a pen and some paper before writing a note that he placed in an envelope and passed to the steward before sending him off.

Once the butler hastily left, Richard got hold of a servant and instructed him to get some vitality potions and wrap them well. The servant left in a hurry while Richard remained in the hall waiting, standing and sitting every once in a while in frustration.

It was at that moment that Wennington hastened over, his eyes brightening at the sight of his brother. His face was still swollen from the assault, aura weak and footsteps light. Richard frowned, "You still need rest. What are you doing running around here?"

Wennington quite obviously flinched, but he still walked over to Richard and smiled wryly, "Richard, there's something I have to say... I'm not sure if I should say this, but I need to discuss this."

"Speak!" Richard's frown grew worse. He didn't understand why this half-brother of his had suddenly become so long-winded.

Wennington obviously began to get nervous, "It-it's about Rosie."

"Who?" Richard thought his ears were becoming unreliable.

Wennington grew incredibly nervous under the blade-like gaze,

sweat starting to bead on his forehead as his stutter grew worse, “R-Rosie... Umm... I don’t t-think she’s quite the same as the other Mensas. I... I think you should give her a chance...”

A cold sneer appeared on the corner of Richard’s lips, “What sort of chance?”

“Like... following you to Faelor...”

“You met her?”

“Yes... no, no...” Wennington was already a nervous wreck, something he had never expected. It felt as though the one standing before him was actually Gaton.

“SMACK!” Before he could finish speaking, a fiery slap rang across his face. He staggered a few steps backwards cradling his face as he stared at Richard in astonishment.

Richard stared back icily, “The Mensas used you as bait to try and kill me; I had to fight two duels back to back to save your life. And now that you’re safe, you’ve set your sights on Rosie. Amazing! Just. AMAZING!

“No matter how pretty is, she is still a Mensa. A Mensa, from the same family that trapped that fool of a man in another plane! Do you still need me to remind you of that? What, did her tits and ass make you forget your own family?”

Wennington’s head hung low, face practically on fire.

Richard’s tone only grew colder, “Young Master Wennington, let me remind you once more. Rosie is my spoil of battle, and she has nothing to do with you at all. As long as I’m alive, don’t even think of touching a hair on her head. You want her? Sure, win against me first! This is the Archeron Family, a place where might makes right. On this floating island, in our fief, I call the shots. Even if Gaton returns, he’ll have to prove himself over me first!”

“Richard, Wennington isn’t that kind of person!” Venica had entered the hall at some point in time. Seeing the enraged Richard,



she couldn't help but rush to persuade him.

Richard snorted, gaze flitting between the two as a smirk covered his face, "You lot aren't half bad, eh. One's level 10 and the other level 9; the former only knows to strip in front of someone, while the other's learnt to pick fights in public and get beaten half dead!

"That trap was so obvious, but you lot jumped right in!" He pointed at his head, "What do you have in here? Did you think being Gaton's children made you great or something? We Archerons have honour, yes, but with the meagre strength you have do you think you can uphold that honour? The family isn't so cheap!"

"This is the last time," he pointed at the two, "Last time I'm saving you for such a thing. With the state of the family right now, it's you who should be supporting the family and not the other way around."

Wennington and Venica had nothing to say at all, but a clear voice suddenly rang from outside the hall, "This isn't his fault. I asked to meet him and persuaded him to bring up my request."

Watching Rosie enter the hall, Richard's eyes quickly narrowed. He took large strides towards her, suddenly grasping her by the neck and raising her up with one hand. The expressions of Wennington and Venica quickly changed, but this time neither of them made so much as a peep.

"Lady Rosie Mensa, I'm in a very bad mood right now. Don't challenge my patience!" Richard was practically gritting out the words at this point, "This is the Archeron island, not the Mensa territory; you'd do well to shut your mouth! Your face might be useful to others, but it has no effect on me. Don't play with fire, or I'll kill you right away!"

Rosie's physique was actually excellent, even slightly taller than Richard's own. However, raised in the air by him she couldn't speak. Even breathing wasn't possible, her face gradually turning

purple.

Only when her eyes rolled back into their sockets and her arms fell off his did Richard release his hold, tossing her to the ground. Finally able to breathe again, the young lady immediately covered her throat with both hands. Hard coughs rang out endlessly, her entire body twitching.

It was quite difficult for her to regain her breath, looking up slightly. And yet, all she saw in front of her was Richard's battle boots. She followed his figure all the way up to his eyes, staring at him with a serene gaze.

Richard had calmed down himself, stating dully, "If not for your families causing trouble in the background, why would I have ended up on Faelor? So many things would have been different today. Stop daydreaming, you don't have the ability to change my decisions."

'Sooner or later, I will come calling for all of your family.' This was something Richard did not need to say. His actions would be enough of a statement.

"Guards!" Richard suddenly shouted, and two soldiers immediately entered the hall to await his orders. He pointed at Rosie, "Take her to her room and tell the steward to monitor all of her activities. Without an order from either him or me, she isn't to take a single step out from her room! Also, capture all the soldiers that were guarding her and turn them into slaves!"

These actions were actually a warning to everyone, and Wennington in particular. Rosie finally lost her composure and looked at him with an imploring gaze, but Richard's face had gone blank. There was no cruelty or anger, only a dull apathy that caused her heart to sink.

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Having dealt with the unexpected issue, Richard no longer

bothered with the pale Wennington and Venica as he left for the griffin station. Three griffins had been roused, preparations made for a long-distance flight.

Richard flipped onto the back of one of the beasts, not wasting any time as he patted its neck. The creature stood and flapped its wings with force, slowly rising into the sky and turning in the direction of the Deepblue. It gradually sped up, disappearing into the vast night sky in the blink of an eye. The two others also let out loud cries, taking flight one after the other as they chased after their companion.

That night looked incomparably pure, illuminated by the scarlet and jade crescents. The clear cries of the griffins occasionally disturbed the silence of the dark, three silhouettes flitting across the sky.

Time passed without rest. Night turned to dawn and day turned to dusk once more as he passed through mountains, forests, and deserts, not stopping for a single moment. When one of the beasts was tired, he immediately changed to another and allowed the fatigued creature to rest. Long distance rides were exceedingly laborious, but every few hours he chugged down a vitality potion to deal with it.

As the sun set and the purple moon took its place high in the sky, the Deepblue finally entered his sight.

## Book 3, Chapter 138 - Responsibility

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By the time Richard landed in the Deepblue, only one of the three griffins that had set off was left. Even this one, the most powerful of the lot, had been pushing itself to the limit to cover the last ten kilometres. The moment it reached the platform, it fell down on its stomach and threw up a bloody froth. It had been drained completely.

Richard flipped off the creature's back, movements still light and agile. However, the moment he touched the ground his legs went weak, an unusual flush rising on his face.

Two mages were stationed at the landing pad, sent by Blackgold to wait for his arrival. Few mages of the Deepblue did not know of Richard Archeron, Her Excellency's greatest pride who had become a royal runemaster before he was even eighteen. This was a student worthy of his master.

The two were surprised to see Richard collapse, immediately helping him up. A cursory examination told them he was only exhausted from the long journey, however, so they felt relieved.

A short while later, he was in a meeting. Outside of Blackgold and Fayr, both of whom he was quite familiar with, almost all of the other grand mages of the Deepblue were present as well. After all, his request was not something the grey dwarf could approve alone. Knowing that Richard had travelled the thousands of kilometres to make it here in a single day, however, and that he had even exhausted three powerful griffins, everyone was touched.

He insisted on taking a look at Sharon, even if she was deep asleep. The legendary mage was currently in her most vulnerable state; were it anyone else, the grand mages definitely wouldn't allow them to approach Sharon's sections of the tower. However, everyone present knew that Richard was the special one, someone who Her Excellency had been wishing for all these years. They

eventually agreed to let him give it a try himself.

Everything within the upper regions of the tower was currently managed by Sharon's elven puppets. Not even the grand mages were allowed into her residence, and these puppets who looked no different from real elves held unimaginable intelligence and power. The tower itself was filled with chaotic space, so a rash intruder without a guide would only be courting death.

The chaotic space wasn't actually an intentional trap. Sharon just had so many things to store that she kept opening up extradimensional spaces to throw them in. These spaces obviously weren't as stable as semiplanes, so they eventually started to release spatial energy in waves. These undulations were nothing to Sharon herself, but to others they were the most terrifying of blades. It wasn't Sharon these grand mages were worried about; it was Richard himself.

However, he remained adamant on giving it a try. Without any better choice, Blackgold and Fayr brought him to the large door to the legendary mage's personal region. These towering steel gates were incomparably familiar to Richard, the rich ochre colour and openwork patterns filled with a primal beauty.

The mithril spell formation carved onto these gates was rarely ever activated, the legendary mage herself never used this entrance. However, space suddenly fluctuated as Richard approached, a tall elf dressed in enchanted silver armour stepping out of thin air. He held a giant two-handed hammer in his hands, a rare weapon for his race but appearing natural for his figure. No mage would be willing to take a strike from this weapon.

"Her Excellency is in seclusion," a cold voice rang out, "No one is to enter."

Richard took a step forward, saying in a deep voice, "My name is Richard, Richard Archeron. I am a student of Her Excellency; I wish to see my Master."

The elf looked up, revealing a pair of amber eyes. He scanned over Richard for a long time before saying abruptly, "You may enter, come with me."

The gates to the region slowly opened as the elf placed both hands behind his back, having some drow Richard to the large hall and spiral staircase that led all the way up. A magic puppet slowly pushed the heavy gates shut behind them, leaving Blackgold and Fayr outside.

Finally, he was in Sharon's personal quarters once more. He remembered this place clearly, still carrying the radiant trauma it had left behind. Everything was still the same as it had been that day; time had not left any traces behind.

The abyssal ice crystals that made the dome up above still emanated that uneven blue lustre, making every item within look dreamy. The bright, clean floor was akin to a mirror reflecting the starry sky up above. The Everwinter Mountains outside the window were lofty and mysterious as ever.

The drow girls who brought Richard here stayed behind at the door. "Her Excellency is within," one of them said in his hear, "There is no need to worry about time. You can stay as long as you wish."

Richard looked in the direction she was pointing, finding a crystal platform covered in shades of blue light. The legendary mage was resting atop the table, her little face peaceful in her deep sleep. In a stark contrast from the crystal surface, her skin seemed so soft that it would crumble with a hard press.

Who could have predicted that these would be the circumstances in which he would see his master once more? Richard didn't head over immediately, remaining rooted in place for an unknown period of time. Every step he took towards the crystal platform was incomparably difficult, but he eventually made it there. He bent over slightly, staring at the little face that could make anyone fall

head over heels as a million thoughts flashed across his mind.

Sharon's blonde hair was scattered loosely around her, like a shower of gold flowing across the crystal table while emitting starlight. However, as Richard drew closer, a strand of her hair suddenly moved.

Having heard that his master had been injured to the point of having to enter hibernation, Richard's mind had gone completely blank. The only driving force in his thoughts was to rush to see her as soon as he could. Now that he truly was here, looking her in the face, he found himself at a loss for what to do.

He didn't even know how injured she was. Detection spells were useless on a legendary mage, and an invisible force was shrouding his blessing of truth. As far as his perception went, this was just a sleeping girl without the unstoppable aura of a legendary mage.

Why did she go fight the gods of Faelor? They were fucking GODS, damn it! At the thought of the many names in Kellac's Book of the Gods, something within Richard trembled. He reached a shaking hand forward, wanting to caress Sharon's face.

At this moment, that strand of golden hair on Sharon's forehead suddenly straightened up. It coiled itself up like the head of a snake, as though it was glaring at him! Richard stared at the strand, but it continued to straighten up. The tip even shook slightly, as if establishing its might.

Just a strand of her hair, was Richard's first thought, but in the next moment he remembered that it was Sharon's hair. Still, despite his reservations, his hand still reached for that small face. Just as he was about to touch her skin, however, the strand seemed to lose its temper and pierce into his hand like lightning.

The intense pain caused Richard to frown, brows locking together, but he didn't retract his hand. He instead continued to reach until the tip of his fingers lightly touched her skin, the warm blood surging out of the wound dripping down the edges of his

palm to bloom on her snow-white skin.

The strand twitched, unwillingly retracting itself. It even rubbed hard on his wound as though wiping something away, but it continued standing tall as though to establish its might.

Richard drew his hand back on his own, if for no other reason than to avoid staining Sharon's golden hair. He sat down at the edge of the platform, silently watching his master in deep sleep. His right hand was placed on his thigh, allowing the blood to seep into his robes and dry slowly.

She had done so much for him, given him so much without him even knowing. Without her, there would be no new royal runemaster, no potential saint runemaster. And now, she had fought for him and fallen deep asleep.

Sharon in her sleep was like a guiltless young girl, impossibly far from her status as a legendary mage. That was the only way for him to disregard the gulf between them and sit beside her, recalling that dreamy night of destiny. Regardless of how much he wished it, he could not remain so unaffected this close to her when she was awake. The waking Sharon was a tempest, strength as deep as the abyss; even the most egotistical of mortals would be ashamed in her presence.

Even now, saying he wanted to do something for her was like a joke.

And yet, as memories suppressed deep within his mind bubbled to the surface, Richard felt a mountain weighing down on his heart. It was a feeling very similar to the moment he had successfully returned to Norland for the first time, only to find out that Gaton was lost in another plane. This was a feeling of wanting to do something for her, a sense of responsibility.

He raised his right hand once more, wiping off the bloodstains on the legendary mage's face. "Sleep well," he whispered, "I'll help you protect the Deepblue in your absence."



Having said this, he stood up and prepared to leave.

The strand of golden hair on her head was still watching him vigilantly, feeling like something bad was about to happen.

It wasn't wrong. Richard reached out like lightning, grabbing the strand and viciously rubbing it a few times. He even pulled on it for a while before letting it go.

## Book 3, Chapter 139 - Responsibility(2)

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The strand of hair appeared to be screaming, violently struggling its way out of Richard's grip before burying itself amongst the rest. However, it then seemed to recall something and came out again, glaring at Richard as minuscule balls of purple energy started crackling at its tip. If he tried to touch it again, having his hand pierced would be the least of his problems.

Of course, Richard wasn't that foolish. He simply laughed and turned around, leaving the fuming strand behind. The purple lightning crashed into the blue dome, disappearing without a sound as it left behind white sparks.

Richard didn't notice Sharon's lips curling into an imperceptible smile as he left, nor did he see her lazily shift her posture and start snoring softly. Instead, he exited the heavy steel gates only to see Blackgold and Fayr still waiting for him.

"Did you manage to meet Her Excellency?" "How is Her Excellency?"

Both grand mages were evidently worried. Sharon was the soul of the Deepblue. Right now, it was a focal point of wealth with connections all over the plane, but if something bad happened to her it was impossible for them alone to secure the place.

"I couldn't tell," Richard said after some time pondering, "There was some sort of energy around Master stopping any attempts to find out. From the looks of it, though, she should be fine."

"Good! That's good!" Although the grey dwarf had his doubts about Richard's ability, the anxiety that had left in constantly sweating was finally relieved. The mere speed at which Blackgold was heaving his chest was a testament to how rapidly his heart was beating.

"Are the new griffins ready?" Richard asked, already beginning

to walk.

“They are. Four in total, with enough stimulants to make the trip. Are you sure you have to leave immediately? You haven’t even eaten anything, and you need to rest.”

Richard shook his head, “No, I must leave now. The time in Faelor passes at ten times the rate of Norland, I can’t afford to while any away here.”

Blackgold and Fayr both understood Richard’s personality, so they did not advise otherwise.

Richard was somewhat familiar with the inner workings of the Deepblue, so he threw a sudden question in the dwarf’s way, “Mr. Blackgold, how long can the Deepblue maintain itself with Master asleep?”

The grey dwarf’s face contorted and he hesitated for a long while before answering, “Her Excellency didn’t open up any of her treasuries before going into hibernation, and I don’t think she intends it any other way. You should know we spend so much money all the time, something only sustained by her earning rate. Her Excellency is normally so busy she ignores minor matters like finance, so it’s normal for her to overlook things now. The reserves I have can only keep the Deepblue functioning for a year at most.”

“We old geezers can only take a third of our salaries,” Fayr suddenly said in an oddly cheery mood, “That will give us four more months.”

The grey dwarf frowned, a rare sight, “This is a matter of obligation and interests. Those of us who have followed Her Excellency for a long time naturally have no issues with that, but what of the others? Not every one of the grand mages is willing to contribute for nothing in return, and several of them are only interested in us for the resources. If we reduce the subsidies and they leave, that will be a huge blow to our reputation!”

Fayr sighed without retort. Blackgold was right; most of the numerous mages living in the Deepblue were here in self-interest. If they weren't offered the right salaries, many of them would choose to leave.

Richard stopped in his tracks, "How much is the deficit for this year?"

Blackgold didn't even need to think about that, "For this year, it should be between three to four million. It's likely to increase next year, and I'm not even accounting for any major events."

"And of those under the Deepblue's employ, how many mages can you deploy?"

"31 great mages and 720 between levels 10 and 15. Out of that second number, 330 are level 10." Fayr was well-aware of these numbers.

Richard nodded, "I'll try to start making use of them over time. As for the financial issues, I'll think of something."

The grey dwarf was shocked, "The gap is nearly four million!"

"I know," Richard said calmly. He then got on one of the griffins and waved to the grand mages, commanding it to take into the night sky.

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It took another day for the griffin to land on the Archeron island. All four mounts reached their destination this time, and although all of them were extremely drained none of them died of exhaustion. The Deepblue's griffins were much better than those elsewhere, far beyond the ones in the Archeron nests.

Richard had finished a quick meal before gathering all his equipment and walking toward the Church of the Eternal Dragon. Half an hour later, the teleportation gate shone brightly and he disappeared into it.

Taking into account his trip to the Deepblue, a month had passed in Faelor. When Richard returned to Bluewater, he found the city bustling with activity once more. Construction workers and materials were everywhere, the roads clogged up with pedestrians and carts.

Most of the denizens of this city in the past wore rugged, durable clothing that was well-suited to the environment in the Bloodstained Lands. Now, however, there was a marked increase in those wearing the elegant clothing of nobility.

The city itself was at least twice as populous in the past. Bickering and physical fighting could be heard frequently as conflicts both big and small grew ubiquitous. The place was far livelier than in the past, and that didn't even take into account the campsites outside the city stretching as far as the eye could see. Numerous cargo cars were seen parked around the campsites, continuous and unbroken. It was practically impossible to find empty flat land now, some people already digging into the hills to expand.

There were several imposing structures in the distance, huge warehouses that could store several tonnes of resources.

When Richard had last been here, Bluewater Oasis was still reeling in the aftermath of war. Most could only take shelter in temporary tents, some even sleeping in simple holes with wooden boards on top. Seeing this active city upon his return, he couldn't help but be astonished.

"My Lord, you're back!" At this point in time, Olar was the only one of his followers who remained so formal with him.

Richard tossed the chest he was carrying to the ground and exhaled, "Where are the others?"

"Some people are patrolling, others quelling riots and training. Oh, and I don't know where Waterflower and Phaser are."

Richard exercised his aching body a little, sensing the locations of each of his followers with magic. Gangdor was patrolling and Zendrall was organising his warriors of darkness, while Tiramisu was busy suppressing a disturbance on some random street. Waterflower and Phaser were several dozen kilometres away from the city itself, but the moment he returned they had started on their way back.

“What happened while I was away?” Richard asked as he continued walking towards his command centre.

“The nobles are all elated after the success of the Bloodstained Highway Project. The first caravan heading west is gathering as we speak, planning to carry more than 6,000 tonnes of resources for trade. Half of that is food, while another 2,000 tonnes is construction materials for the two supply points. The food is for Forgefires, while the remaining thousand tonnes comes from whatever the nobles want to trade.”

“Have someone keep a close eye on the nobles, don’t let them try to fool us with wrong numbers.”

Olar nodded before changing the topic, “There’s another matter, Master. We received news just this morning that a caravan clashed with the warriors we had stationed at the Cracked Canyon. The battle left several dead.”

Richard stopped in his tracks and frowned, “Where is this caravan from? Why did they fight our troops?”

“The reports say it should belong to Earl Lambert of the Iron Triangle Empire. It’s huge, the escort alone numbering 1,500. The thousand men guarding the Canyon retreated after suffering some losses in the skirmish, allowing the caravan through. This Earl Lambet should be the original owner of Camp Bluesquare.”

“Why is there a caravan around the Cracked Canyon? Where were they headed?”

Olar was prepared for this question, “West, with a lot of alcohol amongst their cargo. It appears they wish to follow our trade route towards the Ashen Plateau.”

Richard laughed coldly, “We spent a fortune getting through the Bloodstained Lands and this fellow wants to take advantage of it? As if! Looks like the incident with Salwyn didn’t teach them enough of a lesson. Very well, let them continue moving for a day as we gather our warriors. We depart tomorrow; after this, no caravan without permission will dare to step foot on the route.

The next morning, Richard’s followers were fully prepared and waiting outside his tent. Aside from Richard’s men, there were plenty of noble youths who wanted to follow him to capture the Iron Triangle opportunists. However, Richard had restrictions for anyone wishing to join in: they were only permitted to bring one bodyguard, and any who joined had to be able to endure long hours of hard trekking. They personally had to be level 10 at minimum as well, alongside formal positions as titled knights or higher.

## Book 3, Chapter 140 - Hunt

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Most nobles revered martial skill, especially amongst their youth. A large number of the youngsters present met the level requirement, something Richard hadn't actually expected. That last condition was thus used to limit the number of those in attendance to the children of powerful families or those who were first in line for a fiefdom. Most others would only be considered knights in training until they attained that position.

The only one in the group who didn't meet all of the requirements was Viscount Zim. His level 6 strength was nothing amongst them, but with a saint as a guardian he was far beyond the rest anyway.

Every noble present had excellent equipment, with at least two pieces of superior-grade equipment. Thus, although their numbers were lacking, they would have no problem facing off against an enemy several times their size. Outside of their weapons and armour, even their mounts were varied and powerful. They ranged from armoured warhorses and magic deer to firestep oxen and even a black scaled tiger. These unique creatures were an important factor in the nobles' battle might, the tiger in particular so imposing that no others dared to get close.

However, when Richard appeared atop a unicorn, all these nobles who had never seen a divine beast before were left staring with their eyes as big as saucers. A unicorn was a sacred beast rarer than dragons!

Richard surveyed these nobles once and raised his voice, "We have two objectives on this hunt. One is to eliminate that wretched caravan, while the other is to remove any potential thorn from the Iron Triangle Empire in our path.

"If you wish to fight alongside me, you only need to do one thing. Do you see that fellow?" he pointed at a knight in crimson armour



who dismounted and stepped out of the ranks. This was an elite humanoid knight, expression as blank as any other drone's, "All you have to do is follow him. If he doesn't move, you won't move. If he charges somewhere, you'll follow him in the attack. That is all."

"Lord Richard!" a youthful voice rang out, "How big is the army you are planning to bring? Let us level those bastards!"

"300." Richard's answer left the battle cry stuck in the noble's throat.

Having said all this, Richard spurred on his mount and galloped towards the outskirts of Bluewater. The nobles followed behind him, but they were starting to have misgivings about his power. He wanted to eliminate a 1,500-man caravan and multiple Iron Triangle strongholds with just three hundred men? This was madness! However, there was no turning back. Even if it was for their honour as nobles, they could not withdraw.

The cavalry had been waiting outside the city for a long time. The nobles of the Sequoia Kingdom had long since been exposed to Richard's elites, but when they saw these knights they all gasped! All 300 were armed with enchanted equipment, glimmering with magic light from head to toe. Did every one of these soldiers have superior-grade magic equipment?

Many eyes immediately fixated on the weapons of the knights. These soldiers all wielded long halberds, a class of weapon that rarely appeared because of how difficult it was to control. Every halberd was flickering with magic light; they were all superior-grade!

The cavalry spurred on their horses the moment they saw Richard, joining behind his followers. Seeing them pass by one after the other, many nobles with keen senses suddenly shivered; these soldiers had no trace of vitality at all!

Only after they had passed did the crimson-armoured knight spur

on his own horse, following the group. The young nobles immediately urged on their mounts, forming a clamorous army.

None of them had expected the first stretch of the journey to last an entire day. By the time it was night, the army was already 500 kilometres away from Bluewater! When Richard finally reined in his unicorn and ordered them to rest, the young nobles all fell off their horses. Many simply lay on the ground, unwilling to even move a finger. They might have had great strength, but their endurance could not match up to that of Richard and his followers. Of course, they couldn't compare to the purpose-built battle drones of the broodmother either.

Richard wandered randomly amongst the nobles who were all over the place, "You have two hours to rest and prepare for battle. The enemy camp is ten kilometres away."

"What?" "We're going to fight?"

The noble youths all wailed and caused a ruckus, many just staying on the ground and calling for their guards to massage their feet. Only a few propped themselves up, preparing for battle. Most of the latter group had been a part of the Bloodstained Highway project, with Zim being the leader in terms of enthusiasm, "Which enemy?!"

"Earl Lambert's caravan," Richard answered.

"Great, let's wipe them out!" Zim was extremely excited, on the verge of jumping up and down. The youths who couldn't even stand exchanged glances, a unanimous glare settling on the plump viscount. This fellow had been on the verge of death after only the first hundred kilometres of the journey, after which he shifted on to Tammy's shoulders for the rest. However, because of his status, none of the others dared to say anything.

The two hours of wait were only enough for them to catch their breath. The knights only got off their horses and sat on the ground, getting some food and water to eat silently. Their food was

quite simple, just large pieces of dried meat that was washed down with the water. Watching the kilograms of meat disappear down the knights' throats, the noble youths looked disturbed.

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Two hours later, Earl Lambert's camp. It was silent amongst the caravan, most of the guards in dreamland. About 300 were on a nightly vigil, however, with even those who were asleep ready to fight if needed. Weapons were placed at an arm's reach.

One of the sentinels suddenly felt the earth shaking slightly under his feet, the vibrations growing stronger with time. A row of dark figures appeared on the horizon, rapidly drawing closer to the camp.

"Cavalry attack!" a mournful cry rang through the night sky, but it quickly went silent. A halberd flew past the sentinel's head, taking it off in one stroke!

Every knight was like a moving fortress, breaking down the rudimentary fence before charging straight to the centre of the camp. The cavalry then regrouped and charged in formation, killing as they pleased. The radiance from layers of magic and divine spells alone turned them into harvesters of life, the counterattack not able to even break through the enchanted armour.

One humanoid knight was suddenly sent flying back with his mount, an extremely powerful aura flaring up from the centre of the caravan where he had been headed. This caravan actually contained a saint hidden within!

The young nobles who were watching were rattled by the sight save for Zim, whose own bodyguard allowed him to remain confident.

However, just as the rays of energy started to sparkle in the night sky, the figures of Richard and his followers encircled the enemy

saint. A bolt of lightning fell from the sky, clashing with the shining energy. What followed was a bombardment of explosive magic and divine spells, completely drowning out any energy the enemy tried to emit.

Richard and his followers then separated in all directions, continuing to kill all who dared to resist. A tall figure started swaying in the remains of the battlefield, collapsing with a thud.

Even Zim, who had experienced the meat grinder at Bluewater, couldn't believe his own eyes. How was a saint killed so easily? How long had that battle taken, even a minute? Zim glanced at Tammy next to him, starting to think that this guard wasn't as reliable as he had believed.

The battle ended very quickly. Those who didn't know anything about tactics were still immersed in the terror of how Richard and his followers had encircled and killed the saint in an instant, while those who did were even more shocked by the knights. These soldiers were war machines, simple movements effective in maximising their equipment advantage. One could only feel despair in the face of such warriors.

An opponent of a similar level would have to muster all their strength into a head-on attack to even breach these knights' armour. However, a single slash of the halberds would cut open anyone in one blow. Just a few dozen such soldiers would be terrifying enough, but there were 300! This was not a force that could be obstructed by even five times their number.

Not one of the knights died in battle; Richard's extravagant clergy ensured that even a suicidal warrior wouldn't have his wish fulfilled. The caravan's guard was completely wiped out, the men either dead or imprisoned. All of the goods fell into Richard's possession.

The young nobles and their guards were completely unharmed. They watched the entire battle from a thousand metres away,

seeing Richard lead a massacre against several times his own number. They knew he was a stickler for military discipline; without the elite knight moving, these nobles didn't dare to so much as twitch. Of course, there were some who didn't possess that absolute obedience, but they were stopped by those who had participated in the Bloodstained Highway project. Although they hadn't been there to see it personally, they had heard of the terrifying punch with which Richard had confirmed his position as general.

The next morning, Richard handed the caravan's supplies to an army that had been rushed over from the Cracked Canyon before continuing northeast. They rushed a distance of 300 kilometres in one day, eliminating an Iron Triangle camp with 500 guards without rest. All of that camp's guards had died in battle.

Spending most of the night resting, the army then charged another hundred kilometres and annihilated a 400-guard camp just before dawn. The troops then slowed down, heading for another slave camp...

Nine camps had been levelled in seven days, all along the borders of the Iron Triangle Empire and the Bloodstained Lands. 4,000 enemies had been killed, wiping out the Empire's presence in the Bloodstained Lands.

## Book 3, Chapter 141 - The Mage Association

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The border guard of the Empire had finally responded to the alerts on the fifth day, dispatching a lightly armoured army on Richard's heels. However, with all his men being mounted, Richard was perpetually out of reach of this army who had footsoldiers mixed in. He even managed to take care of the last three strongholds over two days without them reaching him at all.

On the eighth day, he examined the map in his hands only to find out that every stronghold he had marked had been wiped out. He closed the map and sighed to his left and right, "There's nothing left to attack."

Gangdor's eyes lit up with an ominous glint, "No, boss! There's a bunch of newbies following behind us!"

Richard intentionally looked at the surrounding young nobles and shrugged, "That army is ten times the size of ours!"

Gangdor abruptly brandished the large black axe in his hands, roaring menacingly, "My axe is thirsty for blood, and they're just 3,000 pigs!"

The epic-grade battleaxe had sharply increased Gangdor's battle might. In the past seven days, outside of that one interesting event on the first day where they surrounded a saint, the rest of the battles had been too small for him to exhibit his might.

The elite bat he had sent to scout showed Richard that the army was still pursuing them desperately, already within ten kilometres of his location.

'They really don't know better!' he thought to himself, turning to look at his 300 knights. Ruthless was not enough of a word to describe these machines anymore. His smile grew a little vicious as he decided on a direct attack on the fools.

That was a battle of pure destruction. The chasing army was

utterly defeated, the survivors of the calamity scattering in hope of escape. They left over a thousand dead bodies behind.

The unicorn halted with a single thought from Richard, turning a full circle on the spot. Watching the imperial soldiers escaping as far as the eye could see, Richard held no interest in pursuing them. That would shave away at the numbers further, but it held no meaning.

“Let’s go!” he urged his mount forward, heading back to Bluewater Oasis.

The numerous young nobles behind him all spurred their horses, following closely. Their gazes upon him were now filled with a fervour; they were a group of hot-blooded youths after all, and Richard’s soldiers were amazing. The power of this cavalry would leave anyone in despair, and the seemingly ordinary followers had been able to kill off a saint in under a minute. Richard himself didn’t seem too outrageous in terms of level, but every spell of his held unthinkable might. He basically checked every box for the definition of a glorious hero.

And what had they done? From the beginning to the end, they had just watched on without any need to fight. Richard’s intentions were very clear at this point, they had only been brought along to witness his glory. After this trip, most of them turned into zealous supporters just like Zim.

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A few days later, within Bluewater. Richard was in his command centre, a trading path that passed through the Bloodstained Lands now on the large map on his wall. He picked up a pen and pondered for a long while before drawing an X in the north near the Iron Triangle, followed by another on the path towards the Sequoia Kingdom. “It’s time to set up checkpoints,” he muttered to himself.

The Bloodstained Lands were quite even in terms of terrain, so

one could enter from any side. It was impossible to seal the place off completely, so Richard instead chose to imitate the model of bandits and have teams of a few dozen cavalymen everywhere. If a caravan refused to pay the toll, then the horde would converge upon it; he didn't mind taking all of their goods as a fee either.

He had already decided on the troops that would take part in this process. The nobles of the Sequoia Kingdom who had participated in the project would be roped in, a fee distributed based on the efforts of their soldiers.

Once all the large and small bandit organisations were wiped out from the Bloodstained Lands, this barren area would start raking in money.

He drew multiple marks on Bluewater Oasis. With the Lighthouse of Time present, this naturally had to become his military base in Faelor. His current plans were to build a magic tower to protect it.

Lastly, there was the Sequoia Kingdom's Mage Association. These mages that were useless outside of having some mana were surprisingly well-behaved, not doing anything drastic ever since their return. This was something entirely out of his expectations, but thinking of how Kamy and the silver-robed mages had behaved he just knew they wouldn't let him off like that. They were likely scheming something; when they did make their move, it would definitely be serious.

He picked up a stack of pages that contained information on the Association. The sixteen so-called grand mages were listed grandly, some with detailed information on them while others were briefer. What attracted his attention was the mage called Leon. At level 17, the ability to cast terrifying grade 9 spells would make him a great talent even in the Deepblue. Leon was only 37 this year, which meant it was possible for him to reach level 18 in his lifetime and join the ranks of the premier powerhouses of this plane. There was even a chance for him to become a legendary being.



Leon had reached level 12 at the tender age of 24, making him a rare genius in the Sequoia Kingdom. The problem was that Richard was level 12 as well, and he was only eighteen this year. Although he looked much more mature than he actually was given his facial hair, his young face could not fool anyone. The most someone would think was that he was about twenty. This was a genius surpassing Leon at odds with the Association. If their positions were reversed, Richard wouldn't mind eliminating such an opponent no matter how confident he was in himself.

So what did the Association's silence indicate? If he was the chairman of the Association and suddenly crossed paths with a mysterious young mage that possessed unrivalled talent and power that could harm his organisation's finances, the first order of business would naturally be an investigation into his origins.

If someone were to really track down his origins, Richard's history wouldn't be concealed for long. Even with the Direwolf Duke's protection, even if his birth and genealogy had been altered before, not everything could be completely removed. This was the reason he had entered the Bloodstained Lands in the first place. The place was so chaotic that one couldn't easily trace someone who made a name there. However, this challenge was not impossible for the Mage Association to overcome.

Richard suddenly felt the need to give the Mage Association something to do so that they wouldn't have the time to investigate him. Perhaps... Perhaps provoking them was a good choice. He put the information in his hands down and opened the door to the command centre, telling the servant outside, "Invite Baron Schachter over."

A short while later, the tall and slender Baron Schachter entered the command centre. The Baron was level 12 at about 33 years of age, considered quite knowledgeable about military affairs. His foresight wasn't half bad either, so he was considered a promising noble. His father, Earl Burr, had already publicly announced that

Schachter would succeed his title. The only thing left to do was making this official through the royal family.

Richard welcomed the Baron with enthusiasm, “Lord Schachter! I have a business proposal that I hope you are willing to consider. I wish to purchase your portion of ores and metal from the Bloodstained Highway project in exchange for enchanted weapons and armour, all superior-grade. These are the prices.”

Schachter immediately grew excited. Richard’s enchanted equipment was now the dream of every noble and based on the price brought up he realised he could get ten sets of equipment including shields and weapons for warriors. This meant a squad of personal guards that were comparable to a Duke’s! These guards would immediately make him a hot topic amongst high society for a few months. Earl Burr had always wanted to change the equipment of his guards, but he had found it difficult to source such a large batch of good equipment. If he gave this equipment to his father, Schachter was sure that his status as successor would be cemented!

The trade was quickly finalised, both sides satisfied with what they got. Richard obtained a large amount of precious metals and ores that he desperately needed, skipping the middleman costs and giving out only a few sets of equipment. On the other hand, Earl Burr’s territory was only a few dozen kilometres away from the Mage Association headquarters. This was one of the regions where the Association held the greatest influence.

Seeing the equipment Schachter sent back, those old mages would certainly remember something.

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Half a month later, the peace of a little town called Lausanne on the bank of the beautiful Niwa Lake was destroyed.

The little town was beautiful and lavish, twelve magic towers surrounding it. Many of those weaving through the town wore

garments that indicated their ranks in the Mage Association, the ratio of mages here hundreds of times higher than in other cities. Every unremarkable little shop of the many on the main street was selling at least one or two rare materials.

Lausanne was the headquarters of the Sequoia Kingdom's Mage Association. The twelve magic towers were the dwellings of the twelve grand mages that lived here.

## Book 3, Chapter 142 - Ambition

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North of Lausanne was an ancient red-brick building with four floors. This was the institution where the elders held meetings; although it wasn't large, it held five hundred years of history. Although there had been renovations and decorations along the way, the outer appearance still remained the same as when the town had first been constructed. A large number of decisions that affected the entire Sequoia Kingdom.

The fourth floor had a total of thirty offices, sixteen of which were occupied. However, this place hadn't always been half-empty; in the prime of the Association's days, there were grand mages who couldn't even get an office here. The Association's influence over the Sequoia Kingdom wasn't nearly as grand as before.

Even as the influence of the Mage Association grew over the past century, the number of mages had actually decreased. There were now less than 600 registered mages from the Kingdom that were level 8 or higher.

However, this was only a surface decline. The income of the Association hadn't decreased at all; while the reducing number of mages had affected their output of enchanted equipment and other magic devices, this had also allowed them to increase the price twofold. In the same period of time, the price of wheat in the Kingdom had only risen by 5%. The profits of the elders in the Association had actually increased; the cake hadn't gotten smaller, but the number of those who could eat from it had.

Most of the grand mages of the Association didn't like working in this building; they basically never appeared here outside of meetings. However, there were still some people who liked the smell of power in this place, willing to stay here. Grand Mage Leon was here almost every day, sitting around.

As the most outstanding genius of the Sequoia Kingdom in recent years, Leon was unwilling to hand over his responsibilities to someone else. He had become the youngest elder in the Association, even getting to the position of vice-chairman last year. His robes had changed from the red of the elders to a dark gold.

There were only three dark gold mages in the entire Association — the chairman, Leon, and a level 18 grand mage. The level 18 mage was the most powerful in the organisation, but often wasn't in Lausanne. His magic tower was constructed in the northern borders of the Kingdom, said to be guarding a gigantic magic crystal mine. There was an entire tribe of dwarven slaves digging ores for him there.

Leon was sipping on a cup of black coffee in his office, concentrated on the report in his hands. In front of his desk was a tall middle-aged mage, the golden robes indicating that he had a high rank within the association.

"You've confiscated a total of ten sets of enchanted equipment?" Leon inquired.

"Yes, sir. These ten sets can arm a soldier from head to toe!"

"Where are the goods? Let me take a look."

"They are waiting downstairs, please follow me."

A moment later, the golden-robed mage personally opened up two magic chests in a dark showroom and displayed the equipment inside. Leon picked up a sword and activated it, illuminating the table with blue light.

"Not bad. It's a top-notch longsword that I can't pick apart at all. Technique, material, enchantments... everything is top of the line. Based on your judgement, what is the quality of this sword?"

"It should be about the same as the quality goods of the Association," the golden-robed mage said carefully.

Leon couldn't help but laugh as he tossed the sword into the

chest, “Quality goods? You think those weaklings can make goods of this standard? I wouldn’t be able to make something like this if I enchanted it myself. Only old Bank who works on enchantments day in and day out can surpass this. But Bank only produces a few enchanted items in a month. The items in these two chests would take him a year to make.”

The golden-robed mage was startled by Leon’s words, his gaze upon the chests warping.

“And these things came from Richard’s hands?” Leon asked again.

“Yes, I looked into it thoroughly. This equipment was sent back by Baron Schachter, meant for Earl Burr’s personal guard. Baron Schachter was an active member of the Bloodstained Highway project and is still in the Bloodstained Lands. There’s no doubt about it, the source of this equipment has to be Richard...

“Sir,” the mage continued after a while, his tone filled with worry, “I heard Richard is selling cheaper than the Association! This is terrible, at this rate all the nobles are going to look for him instead.”

However, this comment did not elicit the praise the mage had expected. Leon just snickered, “Is that so strange? It’s not that Richard is selling cheap, our price is just too high! Think about it, what are the costs of creating a piece of enchanted equipment? Even the base lafite we sell at thrice the average price in the Kingdom, and then there’s the enchanting fees. Take Master Moxy, for instance, who’s adept at sharpness enchantments. The formations are readily available for him, and he only uses about a grade 6 spell’s worth of mana to finish an enchantment in three minutes. That earns him a profit of 500 gold. Hmph, even I’d be willing to do something so lucrative! That’s how high our cost is!”

The gold-robed mage was shocked, not having expected the vice-chairman to take apart the Association without sugarcoating it at

all. He had no answer for this statement. Experience told him this conversation could be an opportunity, but it was also a fatal trap.

Leon softened his tone, “Actually, the quality of the enchanted equipment that the Association produced a hundred years ago was much better than it is now, not far off from what is in front of us. The selling price then was also lower than Richard’s. However, that is a hundred years ago.”

The mage only vaguely nodded in agreement, changing the topic, “Sir, how do we deal with Earl Burr’s goods?”

“Did you figure out Richard’s background?”

The mage braced himself, “I’m still looking into it. We’ve found out that Richard seems to have a relationship with the Whiterock Dukedom, but our relationship with the Mage Association there isn’t great. We can only do this in secret... This will need time.”

Leon nodded, “There’s no hurry, he can’t run anywhere. But I can’t just let this thing with Earl Burr go either... Right, isn’t there a law that bulk transactions of enchanted equipment have to go through the Association?”

“That is right.”

Leon’s voice turned icy, “Alright then. Take some men and capture Earl Burr. Bring him to Lausanne in secret to be put on trial. He is to be accused of smuggling magic equipment.”

The golden-robed mage was shocked, “Sir, it isn’t simple to capture a true noble!”

“There is a precedent,” Leon countered.

“That’s different, that was just a baron. This is an earl! If you’re not careful, the imperial family and other powerful nobles could intervene!”

Leon snickered, “No, Burr is a neutral noble. They have no enemies, but also no protectors. We just have to capture him, the

worst that could come out of it is some period of protest. Do they actually have the guts to go against us? This is the time for us to show our power!”

The mage shivered inside, finally realising that Leon’s ambition was definitely not limited to becoming chairman.

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In the meanwhile, Richard had a rare period of tranquility for half a month. His life every day was just creating runes and meditating, recovering his mana pool as fast as he could. The quiet lifestyle greatly increased his rune output, allowing him to craft eight in fifteen days. In the meanwhile, he had already recovered to level 12.

The situation in the Bloodstained Lands was quite stable. Richard’s followers worked separately to purge all the bandits that threatened the Bloodstained Highway trade route. With the route just being a trove of gold, many bandits smelled money and flocked over. They didn’t dare to lay their hands on the larger caravans, but even the small groups were worth salivating over. On top of that, many amongst them had devious intentions, like the remaining Red Cossack soldiers.

The immense profits from the trade route could drive anyone insane. The bandits of the Bloodstained Lands were fierce and merciless, and persuasion was obviously useless. Threatening them had no effect either, which was why Richard gave the order to kill any bandits found within fifty kilometres of the route. Once enough were sent to their graves, the survivors would naturally grow smart enough not to touch his treasure.

The Iron Triangle Empire was extremely furious that Richard had wiped out all of their strongholds in the Bloodstained Lands and had already dispatched envoys requesting the Sequoia Kingdom to hand Richard over. Of course, they would not comply. The profits of half the nobles in the Kingdom were already



intertwined with Richard's, and although it would affect the balance of power they would boost the Kingdom's strength. Why would they cut their own arm off? The Empire had expected this outcome as well, it had just been an act to appease their own subordinates.

Such was politics, such was diplomacy.

The Empire had already battled Richard twice. In the first instance, Salwyn had suffered massive losses at Bluewater. In the second, Richard had destroyed nine camps and a caravan. Already hurting from the loss of Camp Bluesquare, Earl Lambert's elites with the caravan had been killed off as well. In addition, three of the nine destroyed camps were his. That left the Earl with a total of 4,000 elites and two saints dead. Even a Duke would lose sleep over such losses.

However, the Iron Triangle Empire had numerous troubles on other fronts. Rislant was losing badly to the Dragon Church, and the expedition towards the coast wasn't going smoothly either. The Empire couldn't afford to declare war on the Sequoia Kingdom. On top of that, while the benefits of the Bloodstained Highway would be tremendous, it was much more important for the Empire's future to take control of the coast.

# Book 3, Chapter 143 - The Broodmother Evolves

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Things had never been so smooth on Richard's side. All of his battles against the Iron Triangle Empire had been one-sided, intimidating the noble youths who had followed along. While they were young, they would still pass on the information to the various influences they came from. He was making use of this to terrify the nobles of the Sequoia Kingdom, warning them not to let the huge profits rush to their head. For the time being, at least, this would preserve his influence.

Bluewater was expanding rapidly, the population already passing 50,000. A magic tower was being constructed in Richard's lands here, becoming a powerful defensive structure that also guaranteed him the right to do as he wished in the city. Those who still considered him an eyesore watched on as the tower was built, but even after half a month there was nobody who disagreed. There weren't even any probes and attempted negotiations from the nobles.

This showed just how stable Richard's position had become. At least for now, no organisations would challenge his position.

Amidst this calm before the storm came news from the broodmother in the Land of Turmoil. She had finally absorbed all the power of the sacred spirit's blood, the energy within so vast that she was entering sleep to assimilate it into herself. Richard pacified her for a while, having her keep the newest batch of fifty humanoid knights around to protect herself.

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At that very moment, deep within a forest in the Land of Turmoil was an empty space that was about ten kilometres in area. No signs of life could be seen here, only a dark grey earth. This place had been part of the forest once, but it had been cleared out with the

help of hundreds of worker drones and humanoids working together. The worker drones had a powerful frontal sting that could bring down even the thick trunks that hugged each other with a few attacks, allowing them to unroot the trees. Of course, any living creatures from ferocious beasts to small ants had fled from fear, getting as far away as they could.

The depths of the Land of Turmoil were a mysterious and dangerous place. The trees here grew in a twisted manner, and beneath them was a dead grey soil. There were no nutrients to support the growth of normal plants here. Numerous golden strips of light covered the sky not far away. However, what should have been magnificent seemed strangely cold in this still grey world.

And cold they were. These were strips of unstable timeforce. The fate of those caught within varied; nothing could happen, but just as easily one could be flung to another plane. There was also a chance that only part of one's body would be sent to another plane, leaving the rest in Faelor. Most dangerous was that these ribbons roamed about unpredictably, often appearing out of nowhere. Not even a powerhouse could fight back if they were caught unprepared.

This was why the Land of Turmoil was considered one of the forbidden zones of the plane. Some other danger areas had at least a few adventurers checking them out, but nobody was willing to come here.

Trees fell by the dozens at the corner of the empty space as the broodmother slowly entered the clearing. She stopped crawling when she reached the centre, her enormous body that was over forty metres long and seven metres tall going still. This was a size surpassing even a dragon's; deep imprints were left on the earth everywhere she passed, the large twisted trees mere stalks of grass in front of her enormous frame.

Once she stopped, the broodmother then supported herself as numerous spiracles on her abdomen opened up, spraying out large

amounts of yellowish-green acidic mist that covered the entire area. Once the mist slowly dissipated, a layer of green was left on the surface of the ground. Even a creature smaller than an ant would have been killed by this attack.

She then lifted her head with difficulty, beginning to spray bundles of white syrup that immediately dried in the wind, forming thin white threads that covered her. The same threads were formed from the spiracles as well, and in a day's time an incomparably huge cocoon appeared at the centre of the empty space.

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Another fifteen days had passed. Richard was carefully placing a rune into a magic sealing box, finishing off his third set in just over a month's time. His mana pool had grown by a fair amount as well; as long as he didn't use Sacrifice to the limit as he had against the Mensa youth, he could now cast a level 6 spell without dropping in level.

As he placed the three sets in his hands, Richard felt like he was seeing three million gold. The huge amount of wealth caused him to overflow with satisfaction; this was a great strength that embodied his value.

At that moment, a consciousness called out to him from the distant Land of Turmoil, "Master, I have awoken."

Deep within the Land of Turmoil, the gigantic cocoon split open and the broodmother crawled out from within. Her body had shrunk from before, only twenty metres long and five metres tall, but her shell sparkled like black glass with intricate patterns all over it.

She started to gnaw at the remaining parts of the cocoon, the humanoids who had performed guard duty all this while gathering around and picking a few pieces themselves. The large group of workers was growing restless, but after a mental command, only

ten crawled out with the right to eat.

This cocoon was made out of the broodmother's own nutritious fluids and the remaining blood of Zuka that she could not absorb. This held great benefits with respect to evolution, so these drones instinctually wanted to have some of it.

As the cocoon was weathered away, a strange little worm with a black shell that was only a metre long appeared amidst the remains. It looked like a smaller version of the broodmother herself, laying lazily on the ground unmoving, but the drones who were eating didn't dare to get close to it.

The remaining portions were quickly divided up, and the broodmother quietly lay there, as if she had fallen into a deep sleep. It wasn't just the broodmother. The humanoids and the worker drones that had eaten were all immobilised as well, bloody veins appearing in the eyes of the former that quickly spread within. Bloody patterns were formed on their pupils.

An unknown amount of time later, the broodmother propped herself up once more. Cracking sounds rang out as her shell split apart on her back, four translucent wings spreading out from underneath as rows of elliptical lightening organs lit up. As the wings began to jolt, the broodmother's huge body actually ascended to the sky!

"What? You can fly?" Richard was shocked!

"Yes, Master. This my newest data, please take a look."

An overwhelming amount of information was transmitted to Richard, to the point that his brain started pulsing. Now at level 6, the broodmother's mental strength completely overpowered his own.

Only after all the data was received did the throbbing stop, allowing him to focus on what had been sent over. The broodmother could now fly 500 kilometres in ten hours, after

which she would need to stop and feed to replenish her energy. With her terrifying digestive abilities, however, as long as she had the food she could replenish her strength in half an hour.

“In other words...” Richard started to grow excited.

“Yes, Master. When required, I can now take part in battles!” the broodmother replied.

There was no question that the broodmother was individually the strongest powerhouse in his possession. Even at level 6 she had no problems dealing with a regular saint, and on top of that her acidic mist was an effective ranged weapon against multiple enemies.

However, Richard and his followers were already strong enough to eliminate a saint easily. Thus, weighing the pros and cons, he found that he still wasn't prepared to let her take so many risks. “Unless it's a life or death crisis, you are not to participate in battle. Your safety is the greatest priority!”

“No! I have a fighting soul!” the broodmother argued.

This answer nearly made Richard fall. He couldn't believe these words had come from the broodmother, feeling more like they belonged in Gangdor's mouth. The broodmother had a soul, and having a soul meant possessing wisdom and character. However, no matter how he thought about it she was supposed to be icy and calm. Why was she having such passionate, hot-blooded thoughts?

“Bullshit. Why do you want to fight?”

She went silent for a while, her reply back to a tone he was used to, “There are many enemies of yours that I wish to eat since they will be useful for my evolution. I wish to directly participate in battle and get the food I'm interested in. Zendrall has already wasted too many materials, I hate it.”

Richard understood her words. A saint's body in Zendrall's hands could create a level 13 death knight at best. There were many

limitations with the undead, and level drops were inevitable. However, a saint's corpse in the broodmother's hands would strengthen all of her drones. Individually the difference might not be much, but that was an infinite army all of whom were strengthened slightly. The impact of that was on an entirely different level.

He suddenly remembered something, asking, "Who taught you to speak about fighting souls and stuff?"

"Phaser. It was an answer she gave me after asking Gangdor."

## Book 3, Chapter 144 - Advancement

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Richard felt his head starting to hurt. These followers of his were growing increasingly difficult to understand, and even the broodmother was showing the same signs. Was this the result of letting them grow on their own paths? He sighed inside, quickly reading through the information that had been sent over, “Anything outside of the flight?”

“Of course, Master. I’ve specified everything.”

There was just too much information this time. Richard had to go through it for five minutes before he could even come upon everything related to Zuka’s blood. It had increased her divinity storage from fifty points to seventy, which was also the biggest benefit of the lot. The more divinity the broodmother could store, the more powerful her main body would become. However, the sacred spirit’s blood was tremendously powerful and would take several more months to fully analyse; the broodmother had only managed to complete a fifth so far. This blood was far purer than Zim’s.

In the analysis section, he noticed there was information related to the unicorn bloodline. Zim’s bloodline was very thin, forcing her to use divinity to make up for the incomplete parts so she could build his mount. Richard’s unicorn was a far cry from the true sacred beast, but she mentioned that more unicorn blood or a live unicorn would allow her to enhance her creations. If she had enough samples, she could eventually start creating drones that were better than the original.

For now, Zim’s bloodline gave all of the broodmother’s drones a 20% magic resistance if she wanted to add it. Of course, that would increase the cost of creation as well. On the other hand, the unicorn she had built for him had consumed a full thirty points of divinity. It could grow in level as time passed.



Even now, the broodmother had another thirty points of divinity left, enough to ascend to level 7. However, she had only just reached level 6 and hadn't completed the process yet; it would be a few months and 500 magic crystals before she would be able to take the next step.

Having read up to this point, Richard heaved a sigh of relief. 500 magic crystals was about 200,000 gold; this would have been an astronomical figure a few months ago, but now it didn't even pinch.

There were additional unexpected gains. The fifty humanoid knights that had guarded the broodmother were given the potential to evolve from the cocoon's fluids; they would grow in battle until they reached level 14. Richard immediately chose to arm them with obsidian equipment; better equipment would increase their chances of survival, something necessary for them to grow.

Having dealt with the broodmother's matter, Richard told her to continue foraging for food in the Land of Turmoil while creating more humanoid knights. Faelor thus entered a period of peace.

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Richard was deep in meditation that night, his consciousness chasing after an azure strip of light with great effort. This was a grade 4 astral ray, only the second one he had seen in the last three months. He had failed to capture it that last time. Of course, he hadn't seen any grade 5 rays either.

The strip didn't seem to have a clear path, but he used his blessings to try and work out a formula for its advance. However, this required a tremendous amount of calculation that even his blessings of wisdom and truth could not support. A dozen seconds later, the strip of light flickered for a while and disappeared.

Richard sighed, trying to erase the disappointment in his heart before turning to capture a violet ray that wasn't far away. This

was rather good as well, only appearing once every day or two. He normally never let these things go, but he had ignored it for the sake of the grade 4 ray nearby.

He captured the grade 3 ray after a nerve-wracking pursuit, leading it into his body. He had found that this process of meditation wasn't just growing his mana pool; his mental strength and calculation speed were being polished as well. The Deepblue series of meditation techniques were far beyond others.

When he captured another grade 2 ray, his body suddenly trembled. His mana pool slowly brimmed over a divide, telling him that he had reached level 13. He could now cast grade 7 spells!

There was an incomparable gulf between every grade of spell starting at grade 7. The power of offensive magic grew exponentially with each level, and the number that one could practise also increased. It was no longer strange for single spells to be able to turn the tides of a war.

At grade 7 were powerful spells like Finger of Death or Spirit Lash that could instantly kill weaker opponents, arcane gates that allowed for short-distance teleportation, and banishment spells that dealt great damage to conjured creatures. There were also barriers that could reflect weaker offensive spells, as well as powerful lightning storms, burst fireballs, and iridescent jets. There were also the greenflame sword, the sword of darkness, and other such mana weapons that surpassed even superior-grade enchanted weapons. However, magic-based weapons were an entire grade weaker than divine weapons at the same level of spell, be it in might, range, or duration.

Richard's mana growth was currently four to five times that of an ordinary mage. The Deepblue Fantasy itself only worked at twice the rate of a normal technique, but with the support of his blessings and astral affinity his ability to capture astral rays was far beyond the other mages who trained in the technique. As his level and bloodline advanced, his training speed correspondingly grew.

This was the source of his confidence.

Having just reached level 13, he chose not to continue meditating, instead loosening up his limbs and cooling off. He walked out of the meditation room and wandered aimlessly to his laboratory, looking at the nearly complete rune blueprint on the desk.

With the strength of his mind and soul raised, inspiration surged out like a geyser at the very sight of the rune. It didn't take long for him to solve all the minor problems that had hindered the rune's completion.

As he looked at the completed design, he found himself extremely pleased with his work. The few issues he was experiencing had been solved using his excess precision, adding six lines where even great runemasters could normally only draw four. Even if this design was made public, few would be able to replicate it.

“Waterflower!” he immediately summoned his soulguard through his mind, “Come to my lab, now!” It only took a moment for her to open the door and silently walk in.

Richard glanced at the time. There were four more hours until daybreak, enough for him to complete the rune. He spoke to her while preparing the materials and tools, “Breath of Darkness is only a grade 1 set, but I found a way to enhance it. I'm calling this new set the Guide of Secrets, designed specifically for you. I'm only upgrading the old runes, so you can keep every ability you already had; combined with your current abilities, you should be able to fight a Faelor saint head-on. Alright, there isn't much time left; let's begin.”

Having experienced rune tattooing before, the girl silently took off all her clothes and stood naked in the centre of the laboratory. When Richard finished pouring the ink into his magic pen and looked up, he was greeted with another sight of the perfect body that was filled with an explosive power. He felt nearly suffocated by the beauty. The complicated lines of the Breath of Darkness

looked elegant on her person, only giving her an added sense of mystery.

He regathered his focus, “Sit there and turn around, the first upgrade will be on your back.”

Waterflower did as told, leaning her upper body a little forward. Her shoulders were broad, her figure curving sharply inwards at the waist before broadening once more at the buttocks. An unimaginable strength was hidden within those curves.

As Richard drew closer, her body began to tense visibly. By the time he was right behind her, she was trembling. When he raised his pen and lightly dotted her backbone, her entire body shuddered and she produced a startled cry.

“Does it hurt?” Richard asked in worry.

“No, it’s fine!” the young lady answered stiffly.

There were many instances in Waterflower’s life where she had sustained bone-deep injuries without making a sound. Pain normally only made her more violent. Having a rune drawn on one’s body would cause some pain, but it couldn’t compare to near-death injuries.

Richard placed his left hand on the girl’s back, his fingers spreading her flexible skin wide; this would slightly reduce the difficulty in drawing the rune. The pen then descended once more, moving at a slow but uniform rate. A winding elegant line was drawn across Waterflower’s back.

Her body tensed as his breath blew across her skin, greatly increasing the difficulty of his task. Still, Richard pretended to notice nothing and just slowed down to prevent any errors. The process of removing a tattooed array was far more difficult and troublesome than adding one. That was another reason for all of his runes this time just being additions to the originals. Unless it was absolutely necessary, he didn’t want to alter or erase what was

already drawn.

## Book 3, Chapter 145 - Guide of Secrets

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An entire hour later, a new rune appeared on Waterflower's back. It was a pattern with a dark blue background, resembling the mysterious stars in the night sky. This was the Shield of Stars, a rune similar to the original Truesilver Ornament that boosted her defence and resistance to magic and the elements. Outside of the protective properties, it had one entirely new function: it allowed one to channel astral energy. This was a precondition for the Guide of Secrets' ability.

Once the Shield of Stars was complete, Richard downed a vitality potion and rested for a few minutes before picking up his pen once more. "Now is the time for the Heart of the Wild. Come, lie down over here."

The young lady obeyed, moving over to the bed under the window where Richard spent his time reading. She lay down on her side in a bid to hide her private parts as much as possible.

"Turn around." Richard's voice was exceptionally gentle, removing some of her unease. She turned around slowly, baring the entirety of her body to him. Her eyes were welded shut, but one could see the eyes moving rapidly under their cover. She was clearly extremely nervous, goosebumps all over her stomach. When the cold tip of the magic pen fell upon her right breast, the young woman squealed softly.

Grade 2 custom rune, Heart of the Wild. It was located opposite the original location of Counterguard which was across her heart, covering an extensive area that blanketed the entire right breast. The rune's purpose was to absorb a certain amount of the wearer's life force, allowing them a single full-strength attack in times of emergency. This attack could be used if one ever approached death, even if their powers were sealed. It was a trump card that could turn the tables in a dire circumstance.

The rune's positioning made it quite difficult to tattoo on; Richard needed to concentrate heavily to steady his right hand. By the time it was completed, his forehead was covered in sweat. He himself was at an age where he was particularly hot-blooded, and he couldn't bring himself to ignore Waterflower's supple breasts. Of course, he didn't particularly need to either,

He stood up and flexed his aching limbs, drinking a glass of iced water in an attempt to hide the changes to his lower body. Then again, Waterflower was an assassin with superior senses; he wasn't certain that his clumsy attempts would be able to fool her.

All that remained was to enhance the remaining five grade 1 runes. This was a complicated and delicate task, but it took only two hours for Richard's pen to turn all of them to grade 2. Outside of some iterative improvements, there were some extra bonuses as well.

First came the improvements to Dark Sight. This gave the rune extended range, also increasing its resistance to certain disruptive curses. Call of the Wild was improved into Master of the Wilderness, stretching from the calf to the ankle. Outside of the original ability to ease travelling through rough terrain, it now improved one's sense of danger in the wild and their ability to ambush in complicated lands.

Next came the enhancement to Shadow Seal, which stretched from the right arm to the back of both palms. Activating it would hide one's breathing and allow them to speed up their attacks greatly. Attacks also gained an additional armour and spell penetration. The Truesilver Ornament became the Truegold Ornament, increasing its defence and resistances.

Finally, Counterguard was enhanced into the Guardian of Destiny. It allowed one to temporarily link their soul to their master's given permission, improving the strength of their soul by several orders of magnitude. Under a certain threshold, one could even reflect any incoming mental attacks.

When Richard finished his last stroke, all seven runes on the young lady's body glowed simultaneously and fused into one. Seeing the perfect body in front of him, Richard felt an immense sense of accomplishment welling up within himself.

Dark Sight, Master of Wilderness, Shadow Seal, Truegold Ornament, Shield of Stars, Guardian of Destiny, and Heart of the Wild. So far, this was the magnum opus of his life, the pinnacle of a grade 2 rune set. A rune knight wearing this set would completely overshadow any grade 3 rune knight that wasn't a set knight. As far as runes went, Waterflower with the Guide of Secrets was superior even to Gaton's thirteen.

The core of this set was the Shield of Stars and its ability to channel astral energy, giving its owner some degree of prophetic ability. This was something Richard had only derived after his own astral affinity had reached the third level.

The set's name was the name of its ability as well: the Guide of Secrets. When it was activated, its owner would be granted the ability to see through souls and time itself, allowing one to identify their enemy's weaknesses and land exceedingly lethal attacks. Such great power naturally came with a great price: it could only be used once a day and only for a few seconds at that before one would need to start storing astral energy once more.

Waterflower finally had the strength to fight saints. If she was in the right situation, the combination of Breath of Darkness and Guide of Secrets would result in an incredible offence.

Richard was sweating profusely, feeling incredibly drained. Even with his great stamina, it had been nearly impossible for him to work continuously for several hours with unwavering focus. The fact that his target was Waterflower only made it all the more exhausting.

Waterflower lay still for some time before shooting off the bed, landing on her feet without so much as a sound. It was as though



she was weightless, a sign of her growth in power. Her body was evidently not accustomed to the sudden boost.

She looked down and inspected the new runes on her body, not revealing her thoughts at all.

Without any runecrafting to distract him, Richard felt the temptation of the young lady's body growing sharply. His own was reacting visibly, but irritated as he was he couldn't help the arousal. He gave Waterflower's bottom a sharp swat, "Dress yourself! Any more and I'm not sure what I'll do next!"

Waterflower's gaze passed across Richard's lower body, and she obediently walked over to fetch her clothes. However, her movements were extremely slow, a stark contrast from the apex assassin she was.

She dressed normally, but Richard felt it to be excessively clumsy. However, the aftertaste of that swat was quite pleasing, her butt surprisingly tender and soft. It had started pushing back the moment his hand touched it, the force growing sharply until he broke contact. The sound of the smack was incomparably crisp.

Waterflower left with her usual silent demeanour. It wasn't until she was out of the laboratory that a sudden realisation dawned upon him, couldn't an assassin like her easily have evaded his hand? Richard shook his head, composing himself before starting to account for his profits over the past three months.

Piled up on his desk was a tower of magic boxes, each containing a set of Savage Barrier or Savage Strike for a total of seven. Looking back at his achievements over the past three months and taking into account Waterflower's new set, he felt elated. There was also a breakthrough in the Mystic Glory series he was designing for Flowsand: a new rune by the name of Cryptic Heart. Its purpose was to raise the wearer's casting speed and store a portion of their divine power, allowing them to form a barrier whenever necessary. The rune still needed finishing touches, but

he believed he would be done within a month.

As for the seven sets, he could sell them to the royal family for as many million in gold or pass it to Alice to fulfil his obligation immediately and earn a powerful ally. The last option was to organise his own squad of rune knights; with such a force under his command, his forces would likely even surpass his cousin's.

He pondered for a moment, deciding to start building his own army first. He had already identified about a dozen suitable candidates from amongst the Archeron warriors and his loyal knights, with the only problem being that they didn't have enough mounts. However, the broodmother was an easy solution to that problem. He immediately contacted her and designed a magical mount based on a horse, giving it superior strength, endurance, and vitality. He even added in some abilities from the unicorn and winged serpent bloodlines, giving them magic resistance and a berserking ability that would greatly increase the creature's speed and strength.

The production of these steeds was even lower than that for humanoids, with the broodmother only able to make two in a day. Since he was already here, he also expended four points of divinity to produce two unique mounts that towered over their ordinary brethren at twice and thrice the size respectively. At the sight of these two new creations, the corners of his lips curled up into a smile. Gangdor and Tiramisu would finally have mounts, no longer constrained to following the army on foot. He was curious as to what their reactions would be.

When he subconsciously checked on the number of available humanoid knights, he gasped. The broodmother had produced an additional 300 knights in the past few months, bringing his cavalry to 800 drones. This left him facing a shortage in gear; of the thousand sets he had brought back from Norland, two hundred had been sent to Bevry to arm his best knights. The Duke had thus returned to battle on the eastern front, decimating several old

rivals.

As for Richard, he now had 800 such knights under his command.

# Book 3, Chapter 146 - Unavoidable Tranquility

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Richard was looking forward to when the broodmother would level up once more. She would certainly give him some pleasant surprises.

His troops were now well-trained and well-equipped. If Salwyn were to come with as many troops as he had before, he was confident in utterly obliterating the prince. However, the Bloodstained Lands were blanketed in silence. The Iron Triangle Empire seemed to be content fighting a war of words with the Sequoia Kingdom, while the nobles on the Empire's southern borders had no intention of venturing back into Richard's lands.

There were many reasons not to attack Richard, but only two that really mattered. First was the same difficulty Salwyn had faced: victory posed no benefits to speak of and the consequences of loss were dire. Unlike the Prince, however, they didn't have the nation's interests at heart. Not every noble could appreciate how frightening Richard truly was: a prodigal genius with a great work ethic who was also adept at politics. The second was the simple fact that Salwyn and Lambert had failed. Naturally, those who were inferior wouldn't dare to risk their lives for no reason. Even the Mage Association had grown humble, not sending any provocation Richard's way.

All of a sudden, Richard found he had an army without a purpose. With no enemy to fight, he couldn't help but lament the waste of power. But then, he couldn't help but laugh. This situation was a result of the endless battles he had faced throughout the past year! Was this not beneficial to him? What he lacked most now was time. In another three months, he would reach level 14 and have crafted eight or nine more rune sets.

This was the worst part of being his enemy. Just a few months of

peace and one would find they were facing a completely different behemoth.

“Ah!” he heaved a long sigh, “I should get some exercise with those who don’t recognise me.”

He then walked out of his workshop, receiving a regular update about the city’s situation and the training of his troops. The first caravan to Forgefires was on its way back, the profits from the trip about three million gold. The number of caravans in the future would increase and this profit would lessen, but even once it stabilised the profits would still be about 1.5 million a trip.

The scouts mentioned that King Bamor had decided to take measures to grow the dwarven population. The restriction on commoners from having children were taken away, and a reward was handed out for every newborn.

Still, the average dwarven lifespan was between 150 and 300 years. They only hit puberty at fifteen years of age, and could only give birth to one child a year. Birth rate was inversely proportional to lifespan; taking into account the mortality rate from environmental factors, the dwarven population would grow slowly. Forgefires’ might was determined by its population, which was something Richard had taken into account for his plans. As long as they had a continuous supply of food, they would quickly expand and absorb the smaller neighbouring tribes. After all, happy is the city which in times of peace thinks of war.

As he walked around, all Richard could hear was good news. There weren’t any remaining nobles who dared to provoke him; in fact, they were fighting each other in order to curry his favour. Seeing how enthusiastic these nobles were, Richard realised that any who dared to annoy him wouldn’t even be worth the time.

He wound up just musing about his ambitions, returning to the laboratory to challenge himself in the world of runecrafting and magic. The day thus passed in peace.

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When Flowsand returned to her residence at night, she found Io waiting for her with a stern expression on his face. She was confused by his furrowed brows, “Io, what’s gotten into you?”

“I must speak with you, my Lady,” Io replied. Despite how he acted publicly, when alone he spoke to Flowsand in a respectful and formal tone. This was the same attitude all heavenly guardians had towards their masters.

“Very well,” Flowsand opened the door to her study, having him follow her in.

Io closed the door and sat across her, staring right into her eyes as he said seriously, “My Lady, Richard has reached level 13.”

A satisfied smile spread across Flowsand’s face, “Oh, yes! Isn’t it astonishing? He should have gotten there earlier, but he was busy strengthening his bloodline all this while.”

“Three months ago, he was level 11!” the battle priest stressed.

Flowsand was a little confused, “Indeed. What is it, is he too slow?”

“No, he’s too fast! In fact, he’ll reach level 14 in another three months and level 15 within the year! I’m still at level 14!”

“Your point being?” The smile on her face remained unchanged as she nodded, waiting for his following words. However, her initial joy had faded away.

“I feel you should consider raising my level limit during the next ceremony. Otherwise, I will only reach level 16 at most, and that’s assuming I can take part in numerous battles. In less than two years, Richard will surpass me.”

Flowsand suddenly laughed, “So that’s what you were worried about.”

“Yes,” Io admitted.

“Very well, what of the offerings? Till date, every offering we use has come from Richard. You think it’s appropriate to use the grace he works hard to earn for me to raise your level limit, just so you can continue to boast in front of him?”

“Verily so!” Io had no sense of shame. Of course, battle priests were prime candidates to boost in normal circumstances.

Flowsand subconsciously sighed, rubbing her forehead, “Why is it that I got an idiot like you? Tell you what, you know what I’d do if I had enough divine grace?”

Io shook his head.

“I’d select another heavenly guardian, and it would be another battle priest too!” Flowsand said fiercely. This was an unexpected blow that blanked Io’s mind, leaving him at a complete loss for words. “If you can’t give me a satisfactory explanation, that’s exactly what I’ll do.”

Flowsand seemed indifferent at this point, but anyone who understood her knew that she wasn’t one to change her decisions easily. While the battle priest hadn’t been in her service for long, their relationship ensured he understood her deeply.

“It’s not that I want to steal Richard’s offerings,” Io suddenly came back to his senses, “We are currently strong enough to search independently for offerings on this plane, but three full months have passed and he shows no signs of acting. I only fought twice alongside his followers, and that was to clear out some local bandits. There was no challenge, and no chance to obtain offerings either.”

Flowsand closed her eyes, as though pondering something, “Io, I feel like you’re different from the normal heavenly guardian. I want to ask you, do you know your purpose?”

“It’s so Richard will still have a powerful priest under him when you return to the Church.”

“Good, you understand. However, your behaviour is making me think you’re choosing to ignore the order you were given when I selected you. I don’t understand where your animosity towards Richard comes from, but if you’re unwilling to cooperate with him for whatever reason I can only select someone else. The next guardian I choose will be a woman. Although I don’t want to leave another attractive girl by his side, it’s certainly better than giving him an enemy.”

Io’s expression contorted, and he finally sighed, “Understood. I am somewhat different from normal heavenly guardians. While they have souls as well, they are nothing more than clever puppets. You have no need to worry; as much as I despise that fellow, I oppose him openly and not behind his back. I certainly will not hinder him unreasonably. I might just be a construct from the Eternal Dragon in your eyes, but I have my own pride. I believe you understand how special I am as well.”

Flowsand raised her brows and eyed Io indifferently, “Very well, I’ll believe you for now. However, leave any hopes of an increased limit until you actually reach level 16.”

Io exhaled, saying nothing. Battle priests were different from clerics; the more spells they used, the faster they would grow. This was why constant battle was when Io felt the happiest. Thus, while three months of peace was ideal for Richard, it was precious time squandered as far as he was concerned.

.....

Bluewater remained merry even after night fell, many parts of the city well-lit. The number of taverns in the place had grown exponentially over the past few months, but even so many were frequently overcrowded. The traders who had made a fortune from the first caravan would soon return and fill their coffers with coins, so the entire city was celebrating. Groups of drunkards wandering the streets were a common sight.



Waterflower was roaming the streets like a restless spirit, a fire in her heart leaving her unable to calm down.

## Book 3, Chapter 147 - Silence Broken

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Waterflower didn't know how to get rid of the fire within her, feeling an inexplicable annoyance. Just what was she irritated about? Didn't she receive a complete upgrade to her set just last night? Wasn't this the power she was looking for?

The girl was a terrifying talent in battle. With the new rune set, even at level 13 she could fight head-on against a saint of Faelor. Originally, such growth in power was the only pursuit she had in life. But now that this power was in her hands, for some reason she couldn't bring herself to be happy at all.

She had been huddled in her room all day, too numb to even try adapting to her new power. At night, when she couldn't find it anymore, she went and looked for Gangdor to spar with. However, although Gangdor was level 14 now and had a set of his own, his training in the death camps had left him with a keen sense of danger. He noticed her dangerous aura so he shamefully withdrew.

Left blank for a moment, she had told him to change the spar to a drinking competition instead. The brute had immediately grown overjoyed, grabbing Tiramisu, Olar, Zendrall, and others to be witnesses to the "fight." He didn't even let Kellac or the young Caesar off, the more onlookers there were the more glorious his victory would be. Only after everyone gathered did he start the competition grandly.

While Gangdor had been struggling to find an audience, Waterflower had stood there blankly with her eyes focused on an unknown location. A total of thirty bottles of strong whisky had been brought over, enough to leave a dozen strong orcs fainted.

She had muddled memories of beginning to drink, muddled memories of watching Gangdor's expression from calm joy to shock; muddled memories of the brute collapsing to the ground. 'I won?' she remembered having thought to herself at that point,

looking around at empty bottles and the awed expressions of Olar and the rest. Right, she had beaten that idiot in a drinking competition.

And yet, she hadn't even felt dizzy. It was as though she had only been drinking water all the while. Feeling a sudden pang of loneliness, she waved the crowd away before picking up her longsword and silently leaving the place. That was how she had ended up on the city streets late into the night.

All she could see through her narrowed eyes was Richard's figure, but she didn't want to meet him.

A few drunk aristocrats walked out from the street opposite her, talking loudly about the returning caravan, strong wine, and women. The latter especially made everyone burst into a peal of knowing laughter.

The noble in front suddenly went rigid, standing still as a statue. The road was blocked for those behind, so someone strongly patted his shoulder and let out a breath that reeked of alcohol, "My Lord, what did you see that you can't even walk? It can't be some peerless beauty, could it? Such a woman would be in someone's bed already... Ah!"

The noble who was speaking became still as well. Those behind him all squeezed up and looked over, and audibly sucked in a breath of air. At the end of the long street was what seemed like a night elf walking towards them, her confused small face emitting a hazy radiance in the moonlight. This ethereal beauty didn't even seem human, her gait holding the grace of someone walking on the wind.

"I'm not dreaming, right?" "Heavens....." "I wouldn't mind giving up ten years of life to have her in my bed..."

The nobles all started mumbling, their gazes following the girl in front of them. The girl herself couldn't see nor hear anything at that moment, immersed in her own world of panic, annoyance,

and regret over something unknown.

‘You should be a bit braver, just a little more...’ A voice repeatedly echoed within Waterflower’s heart, making her feel insane.

There was someone blocking the way! She instinctively moved two steps to the side, swaying like a ghost as she passed through the nobles to continue wandering down the road. These nobles saw that the prey in their hands was about to fly. Immediately half sober, the fastest one quickly reached out to try and grab Waterflower.

Even in her half-addled state the girl’s perception was keen. The clumsy immediately stirred her vigilance and she lightly stepped aside, the Shepherd of Eternal Rest raised together with its scabbard. The noble grabbed empty air, his ribs instead knocking against the scabbard of Waterflower’s sword. The blow left him in so much pain he couldn’t even call out, directly collapsing to the ground with his body twitching.

“Baron! What happened to you?”

“Damn, this chick strikes hard!”

“Take her back to interrogate!”

The nobles went into a panic, but in the midst of the fuss a few nimble figures jumped out of the darkness to surround Waterflower. Even in Bluewater these aristocrats brought their guards along, but in order to enjoy the brothels fully they were normally hidden away. If their lords met with any danger, these soldiers would appear from every corner.

Waterflower finally recovered from her stupor, her gaze sweeping across the guards surrounding her as killing intent permeated her eyes. One soldier who had sharp awareness suddenly shivered, unable to help but take a step back as his teeth began to chatter non-stop.

At that time, one of the youths who felt like the situation was under control swept his eyes up and down Waterflower's body without the slightest hint of shame. "Capture this chick!" he shouted loudly, "I have to 'interrogate' her properly in revenge for Baron Zeton!"

Another noble grew unhappy at this, "That won't do, you're being too mean. Such great goods, how could you 'interrogate' her just by yourself?"

"Right, forgive me. How about this, we can all interrogate her together for an entire day and night!"

The noble youths yelled loudly, pinning all their gazes on Waterflower as they began to judge her even more impudently.

A tall guard suddenly walked out of the darkness, the earth shaking with every step he took. His mountainous body was filled with a cruel aura, the huge sword in his hands at least a few hundred kilograms in weight. The energy within him was almost overflowing; although it wasn't yet at the state where it had condensed into a physical form, his silhouette still glowed in the dark.

A saint! Although this person's aura was a little weaker than most saints, clearly having just advanced, he was still a genuine saint powerhouse!

The man let out a deep laugh, "It's best to give up, girl. My sword doesn't have any eyes. Isn't it just sleeping with my master once? What's the big deal anyway? You have to fuck a man at some point, my master is very generous!"

A cold fury radiated from Waterflower's eyes, "A mere saint, coming here to seek death!"

"What?" The man could hardly believe his own ears. A mere saint? This stunning girl herself was only level thirteen, yet she called him a mere saint! However, he wasn't given any time to

think. The Shepherd of Eternal Rest had already left its scabbard, noiselessly stabbing towards him!

The man suddenly saw a mysterious azure light shining in the girl's eyes. His thoughts suddenly turned cold, his mind freezing over in a flash. He no longer cared about hurting the girl in front of him, mobilising all his energy with a roar as his huge sword stabbed directly at the enemy.

Waterflower seemed to merge with the darkness, the Shepherd of Eternal Rest lightly tapping the huge sword. She used the borrowed momentum to appear behind the man in a flash, his lower back lit up in her vision. An ethereal darkness suddenly condensed on the edge of her blade, her entire body leaning into the blow like floodwaters overpowering a dam. The longsword was like a soundless bolt of black lightning, quietly piercing through the man's waist.

Guide of Secrets, Breath of Darkness. In the first few moments of the battle, Waterflower had already used both of her set skills. A cloud of bloody mist exploded from her target's waist, spreading quickly. In the meanwhile, she herself moved ten metres away as though she was floating on water before standing still. The spray of blood didn't manage to so much as touch her.

Only when the mist dissipated did everyone see a shocking gap in the man's abdomen. Almost half of his waist had disappeared! The nobles finally sobered up from the terror, one of them screeching as they took the lead to run away. The rest of the nobles followed suits and flew out, scattering like a flock of birds in but an instant. The guards, however, remained to perform their duty. One could say they were heroic and unafraid of death; not a single one of them followed their master in running away. These soldiers paid heed to bringing up the rear, keeping a close eye on Waterflower while retreating step by step. Only after they were hidden in the darkness once more did they disperse and escape.

That saint powerhouse had already been completely abandoned;

there was no one who dared to snatch his body.

The outburst seemed to have a cathartic effect; Waterflower felt some of the stifling mood fading away. However, she didn't actually like killing; without the mood to chase after those drunkards, she just walked alone in the dark.

The depths of darkness, this was her world.

## Book 3, Chapter 148 - How About A Battle?

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A servant interrupted Richard's morning meditation, telling him that quite a few nobles had charged in and demanded for him to punish Waterflower.

He was slightly astonished, not able to understand how exactly that cold reclusive girl would have provoked them. Heading straight to the meeting hall, he found eleven nobles packing up the small hall like a bunch of sardines. There weren't even enough seats, forcing some to stand, but at least they had the basic etiquette to leave an empty seat for him.

He walked over to the sofa and sat down, telling a servant to call Gangdor and Waterflower. He could just have called out mentally, but there was no need to give these people such information.

He swept his gaze across the lot, the annoyance evident in his eyes. An hour of his time was worth thousands of gold; these buffoons couldn't understand how precious time was at all. He leaned forward and supported his head on one hand, 'earnestly' listening to their complaints and requests. Although he seemed to be serious about this, his posture held an unconcealable aggression within it. The infuriated nobles were unable to help but swallow some of their complaints regarding himself, pouring out all their grievances on Waterflower.

Richard's expression grew increasingly dark. Eleven voices rose and fell in succession, sometimes with vehement accusations, sometimes with declarations and demands. They had obviously twisted and exaggerated the most important parts, growing more and more agitated with every word they spoke. Viscount Ambrose in particular, the leader of this group, was almost ready to jump on top of the table.

Saints were precious personnel that even dukes spent time enticing. The man who had died at Waterflower's hand last night



was Ambrose's bodyguard, but he was only lent to him by his father Marquess Albrech. With the saint having died in the middle of Bluewater, the youth would have no excuse once he returned.

When Waterflower silently walked into the hall, the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees. She recognised all the nobles that had fled the previous night, her gaze turning cold as her hand reached for her blade.

The voices in the room immediately lowered. Only now did these fellows remember that this girl served Richard, and the fact that she could kill a saint so mercilessly meant their relationship could not be anything simple. Their anger simmered down.

Only a fool would be alright with Richard as an open enemy. These people were originally here just to get an apology and some compensation; after all, the life of a saint still had some value. Ambrose, in particular, had to go through with it no matter what; he had to remain unyielding regardless of the outcome. This was mainly for the sake of his companions and a trusted aide of his father's that was hidden amongst his servants, an act that would reduce the responsibility on his own shoulders.

After listening to everyone for some more time, Richard raised his hand. The hall immediately went quiet as they awaited his statement; such was his authority.

A light smile appeared on his face, "I understand the general situation. You drank a little too much at night and didn't recognise her when you crossed paths so you made a few jokes. But then she suddenly attacked and killed that saint guard of yours. Is that right?"

Viscount Ambrose hesitated, but eventually he nodded, "Roughly."

This elicited a dark chuckle, "You brats actually have the guts to make jokes about her? It's just a degenerate saint, so what if he's dead?!"

Ambrose and the rest of the nobles were dumbstruck. What's the big deal about a saint? It took a while for the Viscount to recover his senses from the shock of that statement, "Sir Richard, you cannot put it that way! This is a saint! You have to make it up to us..."

"Make it up to you? You still want me to make it up to you after you dared to joke about my woman?" The sun disappeared from Richard's smile, replaced by freezing clouds, "Are you tired of your lives?"

The emphasis on 'joke' was clear enough of an indication that Richard wouldn't accept their doctored version of events. Put another way, it meant he didn't care for their statuses at all.

Noticing that the situation was deteriorating, one of the nobles flashed a smile and tried to ease the tension, "Sir Richard, it's only a woman. Besides, Viscount Amb—"

Richard interrupted him with another raise of the hand, shutting him up, "Enough, you've already wasted enough of my time. I won't pursue the matter, but next time you do something so foolish it won't be so simple as the death of a guard. This is Bluewater Oasis, my territory. You'd best know who my people are."

Ambrose's face reddened. "RICHARD!" he thundered, "You're far too brash! Let's end it here? Let's see if you really can take on the consequences of ending it here!"

Richard glanced at the Viscount, "Your father is Marquess Albrech?"

"Yes!" the Viscount looked up, but inside he was sighing with relief. Richard had finally remembered his identity.

However, Ambrose couldn't have expected Richard to wave him off as though he was a fly, "Alright then. If Albrech doesn't accept this, have him send an army over. Let's battle!"

Ambrose gasped. He hadn't expected Richard to even be willing to fight, forget being impatient for one. Shouldn't he have apologised and given him compensation? While the expected result would still result in Marquess Albrech reprimanding him, the Viscount at least wouldn't lose his reputation. He was arrogant, but he was no fool. Waterflower could kill a saint; it was impossible for him to get Richard to hand her over. If their positions were reversed, he wouldn't agree to it either. However, Albrech's bodyguard couldn't die in vain. An apology and some monetary compensation would be a bare minimum to resolve this dispute. Who would have guessed Richard was so tough and nasty, possessing no poise at all!

Left with no other choice, the Viscount could only press on with his verbal tirade, "Good, very good! Just you wait, the nobility of the Sequoia Kingdom will teach you your place!"

Richard smiled in response, "Point at me again, and I'll cut your hand off."

Ambrose was left feeling a mix of embarrassment and rage, but he didn't actually have the guts to call Richard's bluff. He snorted loudly and turned to leave, but didn't even dare to slam the door behind him.

Once the Viscount left, Richard shook his head helplessly and turned to the nobles who were still in the room, "Tell me, what should I do to teach some respect? Should I kill some more?"

The nobles all broke out in cold sweat, immediately praising him and expressing their thoughts on the magnificence of the Bloodstained Highway. Richard was the war god of the Sequoia Kingdom; at this point, he didn't need to kill people to establish his prowess. "Is that so?" he responded to the flattery, leaving everyone shivering with fear. Feeling like they were frightened enough, he had them ushered out before turning to look at Waterflower and Gangdor.

“I’m sorry.” The young lady’s head had been lowered for a long time, her teeth gritting hard as she forced the words out of herself.

“What did you say?” Richard couldn’t quite believe his own ears.

Waterflower’s head stayed down, unwilling to look up and allow Richard to see her face. He suddenly understood what she was referring to and burst into laughter, “You mean for that saint? Don’t worry, and don’t be afraid to give me trouble. If something like this happens again, I can kill a few of those fools.”

At this point, Richard sighed, “I feel like fighting!”

“Me too! All the bones in my body are itching!” Gangdor had the same thought.

Richard stood up and walked a few rounds inside the hall, “I know, but this isn’t the time to declare war. Endure it for just a little while longer.”

A short while later, Gangdor and Waterflower left the hall in order. The former halted the moment he was out, about to say something, but before he could even turn around Waterflower crashed into his back.

“Hey! Aren’t you awake yet?” the brute grimaced, rubbing his lower back. The girl’s strength was astounding; even a thoughtless bump was comparable to a knight’s blow.

“It’s nothing!” One could tell Waterflower was lying with a single look at her face. However, she didn’t wait for Gangdor’s response and instead distanced herself, fleeing like the wind.

Gangdor gaped, scratching his head in bewilderment, “I just wanted to go look for some bandits to kill, why did she run away so quickly?”

The distant girl was already lost in her own thoughts, heart pounding as she wondered, ‘He said I’m his woman... What... What does it mean?’

.....

Another month passed by peacefully.

The first caravan to the dwarven kingdom returned a success, bringing back great benefits. Anyone would go crazy over the three million in profit, and Richard got an entire quarter of the goods. He didn't even take any gold, only grabbing the ores and metal.

The resounding triumph showed all the nobles of the Sequoia Kingdom the immense value of this trade route. They also saw firsthand the value of the 25% share in the profits Richard possessed. This was a wealth even the royal family would be jealous of, but it had entered the hands of a little frontier knight.

Even though his accomplishments were widely renowned in the Sequoia Kingdom, they hadn't been ratified by the royal family. Thus, he remained a titled knight despite the unprecedented success of the Bloodstained Highway. There was no need for anyone to remind him of what this meant— Richard knew a storm was coming.

This was a storm he had been anticipating for a long time.

## Book 3, Chapter 149 - War!

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Three burst fireballs and two Nature's Beckon spells were stored inside the Book of Holding. Richard had added four hundred points to his mana pool in the past month; even if he used Sacrifice with a grade 7 spell, he wouldn't drop in level.

He had also completed two rune sets on top of the Cryptic Heart rune on Flowsand's body, and with the 700 knights the broodmother sent him came the mounts he needed for his rune knights. He picked five level 12 Archeron warriors to form his first squadron, giving them a full set of runes that boosted them to near level 15. On top of that, Richard armed them with superior-grade equipment from head to toe.

Everything was prepared. All that was left was the pretext for war. And when Schachter rushed towards Bluewater City, he had no idea that he would soon become that very pretext.

Richard was in a rather good mood when the two met, a stark contrast from the baron. There was naturally a reason for this; meditation had been exceptionally effective in the past month, skyrocketing his mana growth to twofold what it was in the past. His growth rate was now nearly an order of magnitude beyond the regular mage, mainly because of the increased frequency of the more powerful astral rays. On top of that, the constant use of his blessings strengthened them as well.

Baron Schachter seemed travel-worn, hair dishevelled and the dirty strands sticking together. His eyes were completely bloodshot, a result of not having slept properly for a long time. The man was thinner than when they had last met, more haggard. It seemed like he had aged an entire decade in the time they had not met.

Schachter subconsciously wrung his hands, his voice tinged with insanity, "Sir Richard, you must help me! My father and family

will be done for!”

Richard first instructed his servants to bring over a cup of black tea with some added alcohol, trying to calm the baron down, “There’s no hurry, Schachter. Take your time and explain what’s happened; you’re safe here.”

Schachter finally relaxed, flashing a ruesome smile, “Sir Richard, the disaster to my family is actually because of that magic equipment you gave me....”

His narration was messy, but it wasn’t long before Richard understood what had transpired. After confiscating the magic equipment that Schachter had sent to Earl Burr, the Mage Association had contacted him in secret. They promised to ignore his flouting the law completely as long as he admitted he had bought magic equipment illegally, even tempting him with the return of the equipment as well as discounted prices in the future.

When the enticement was combined with silent threats, the Earl eventually gave in and admitted that he had broken the laws of the Mage Association and bought a large batch of magic equipment, even writing it down. The Association had gone silent for a while after this, but they didn’t return the seized equipment. Feeling uneasy, Earl Burr hadn’t dared to ask for it either.

However, a dozen black-robed enforcer mages from the Association had assaulted the Earl’s castle one week ago, using hundreds of elite knights to apprehend the man and occupy the castle. The Earl had then been taken to Lausanne, jailed in a secret prison. The admission of guilt that was meant to be a secret compromise had now turned into the most effective of weapons in court.

Interestingly enough, the Association had hidden the name of the supplier in public. They hadn’t mentioned Richard’s name at all. Still, when the news got out, the entire Sequoia Kingdom went into an uproar. The Association’s domineering moves immediately

left all the nobles uneasy and infuriated, condemning them without end. Even the King would not be willing to put an earl on trial so casually, but the mages had done just that. While they had a very good excuse for it, the nobles still wanted to know who exactly had given them so much authority.

However, Burr was a neutral noble who didn't align with either the royal family or any of the three dukes. This normally allowed him to avoid any conflicts, but this also meant he had no powerful allies to help him out of his emergency. For some reason, the royal family and the three dukes remained surprisingly quiet. The other nobles applied constant pressure to the Association, but the mages refused to answer.

With nobody at the helm, the aggressive protests eventually petered out. With nobody willing to stand out and battle such a powerful organisation, the public opinion was meaningless. Earl Burr was allowed to be put on trial.

“What will happen your father?” Richard asked after hearing everything.

“The best outcome is a large fine and the confiscation of all the magic equipment,” Schachter smiled bitterly, hesitating for a while before he continued, “As for the worst... He will be imprisoned, perhaps even executed.”

Richard immediately frowned, “Executed? Does the Mage Association even have the right to do that? Even the King cannot kill an earl so easily.”

“There are many ways to do it. They can secretly kill him in prison, telling the public that he died of sickness, age, or even suicide...”

Richard thought it over, realising that this was a likely outcome. At the very least, that would leave some honour for the other nobles, even if the excuse was rather flimsy.



“How about the territory?”

Schachter spread his arms, “Divided up, and then gradually taken apart. That’s it.” With the leader of the family dying such a dishonourable death, even the most powerful of successors would not be able to keep control of the family’s entire wealth. The Mage Association definitely wouldn’t allow the successor of someone they killed to grow so easily either. It was all too likely for the inheritance to be split up, internal strife and external invasions tearing the Earl’s lands apart.

Richard nodded, lifting his cup and tasting the black tea, “I can help you with this, but do you have the courage to oppose the Mage Association? And I don’t mean in court.”

Schachter was surprised at first, seemingly a little flustered, but then he calmed down. His expression grew cold and merciless, hoarse voice ringing out viciously, “Yes! I will draw on every able fighter in my territory, giving you 2,000 warriors! However, only half of them can really battle. The other don’t have full equipment and their training isn’t complete.”

Richard knew that a baron would have to use everything to bring out 2,000 warriors. “Fine,” he answered, “Return and gather your army. When your men are ready, I will join the battle.”

Baron Schachter abruptly stood up and shouted, “One week! The army will be ready in one week!”

Richard took out a map of the Bloodstained Lands and pointed at his territory that was still being developed, “Good. This is my territory, assemble the regiment here. I will join you in a week.”

Schachter suddenly knelt on one knee and gestured with subservience, a courtesy reserved for a vassal with his lord. He then strode out of the hall.

All this while, Flowsand had been watching the conversation within the hall. As Richard started to amble back and forth around

the hall, she finally spoke up, “This is a little strange. The Mage Association is basically challenging the authority of the King and the dukes, why are they so silent? We should ask Bevry, there must be a reason. And then there’s the Association not mentioning you but letting Schachter get away...” Considering the speed and power with which they had captured Earl Burr, it was impossible for Schachter to have escaped alive if the Mage Association didn’t want him to leave.

Richard nodded, “Seems like this is a more difficult opponent than we’d expected. There’s no need to ask the Duke anything; they just want to drag me into this. As for the royal family, they likely plan on grabbing my shares in the Bloodstained Highway. The profits from the route can be measured in tens of millions of gold every year, so they likely want to use a royal decree to take control of it and fix their image.”

“What do you plan on doing?”

“What else? We’ll only talk after battle! No matter what they’re planning, we want war as well. We can find out how powerful the Mage Association is after we meet them on the battlefield!”

“That’s good! Io has been hoping for war every day.”

Hearing the name of the battle priest, Richard snorted. Flowsand mirrored his action, referring to something else as she said, “At least the battle priests of the Church don’t have the habit of stripping at random!”

Richard stiffened up for a moment before suddenly grabbing her by the waist, dragging her into the bedroom. She scolded him and struggled for a while, but eventually gave in. However, she didn’t use the martial arts of the church during the entire process; who knew if Richard would be able to win if she had.

## Book 3, Chapter 150 - War Is Declared

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Bevry sent Richard a letter through the communication array the next afternoon, explaining the situation with Earl Burr. The Mage Association was prepared to divide his shares in the Bloodstained Highway with the royal family, and was also investigating his background. They were growing suspicious of him, but they didn't have any definitive evidence yet. The current idea was to force out the 'teacher' backing him to ascertain his true power and background.

Richard snickered after reading through the letter, saying to Flowsand, "There's no need for my 'teacher' or the demigod to appear. The probe will stop at us alone!"

The letter did have some use. It showed that the royal family wasn't prepared to fight him in public, only planning to intervene from the shadows. In other words, his war would only be with the troops of the Mage Association. In other words, the royal family and the three dukes would continue to maintain their silence. Of course there were other alliances in secret, but at the very least he wouldn't become an enemy of the entire Sequoia Kingdom.

The atmosphere in Bluewater grew increasingly tense over the next few days. Richard's soldiers were pouring out of the city constantly, batches of them leaving the city. The nobles who started guessing at the destination came to an unsettling conclusion: he was heading towards the Sequoia Kingdom!

The soldiers had been in constant training over the past few months. Only half the initial 10,000 slaves were retained, but the total might of those troops had actually risen. The 600 barbarians, in particular, had fearful strength. Richard had only left 1,500 men to defend Bluewater, bringing the rest of his army and his followers to march towards the Sequoia Kingdom.

It was always Richard's clergy that left everyone jealous of

Richard's army, and this time was no different. He drew on a few dozen clerics from the three churches, leaving less than ten to run the oasis city. The nobles who had eyes and ears everywhere quickly ascertained his intentions. His troops were gathering at his territory, prepared to head into the Sequoia Kingdom!

Given the latest news from the Kingdom itself, these nobles immediately linked his movements to the Mage Association.

.....

In a small meeting room within the Mage Association headquarters in Lausanne, three mages were gathered around an old round table. The main theme of this room was mahogany, but with so much time having passed the wood now had a purple gloss over its surface. The short, narrow room had not been maintained well; the oil paintings of the gods drawn on top were terribly faded.

The three mages sitting around the table were all dressed in dark gold robes. Opposite Leon was the chairman of the Mage Association, Theodore, while at his side was a wizened old man named Hoover, the highest-level mage in the entire Association.

Theodore was extremely solemn, enunciating every word, "This is a rather significant move. The risk we are taking is a little too high."

Leon sniggered, "If we succeed, we can terrify all the nobles of the Kingdom; the Association will ascend to an unprecedented position. How could such huge benefits be obtained without any risk? We still have everything under control. We can poison Burr to his death at any time."

The chairman frowned, "No, that isn't appropriate. We still need to have him go through a public trial and admit his guilt. Master Monet is very adept as soul magic; we can just take control of Burr's mind."

Leon revealed a mocking smile, “Do you think the others won’t be able to tell he’s being controlled? What’s the point of it, we won’t be fooling anyone!”

Theodore remained calm, “Even if we cannot fool a single person, we still need to do this. It is the last veil between us and the nobles of the Kingdom.”

“What an exquisite description!” Leon mocked, even applauding a few times.

However, there was no change in the chairman’s expression, as though Leon truly was praising him. He flipped through the information in front of him, “Is there nothing wrong with Richard? Have you figured out his origins?”

Leon frowned, “His first appearance seems to be related to a planar invasion in the Whiterock Dukedom. I went to the Church of Valour in the Kingdom and asked for the priest there to pray to Neian, but for some reason his connection has grown very weak. The priest hasn’t obtained any prophecy in the past year; even with the highest grade of ceremony, he hasn’t been able to establish contact.”

Theodore nodded, “The Churches of Time and Space have been reporting similar events. Runai hasn’t spoken in the last six months, and Cerces was only slightly better with a single prophecy. But even that wasn’t much; the prophecy only commanded them to grow the faith as quickly as possible.”

Leon frowned, “This is going to be a little troublesome, we need to put the investigation aside. While the people in the Bloodstained Lands are spreading all sorts of rumours, I still think the power behind Richard is a grand mage at most. There are only a few legendary mages in existence, how could a new one come up out of nowhere? If Richard is smart, he’ll give up on the enchanted equipment and the Bloodstained Highway. If he doesn’t let go... Hmph! There are quite a few uncontrollable people who die every

year!”

Theodore lightly rapped the surface of the table, “I propose that the Association enter emergency mode, and all our soldiers and battle mages are to prepare for war. We need to be wary of the Direwolf Duke. While a mere titled knight shouldn’t be amongst his core subordinates, he is still a vassal. We should also be on guard against the other two dukes and especially the King. He’s the real fox in all of this.

“This is the mobilisation order. Take a look, if there’s no problem with it we can proceed. Of course, I still maintain my opposition to this war. Keep the scale controlled.”

He then pushed a file over to Leon and Hoover, something that froze Leon’s heart. If this document had already been prepared, then Theodore had anticipated the final conclusion of the meeting in advance. This old codger would be no pushover. Although he was only level 16, his intentions were incomprehensible. It would not be so easy to take control of the Association.

Leon took the document and scanned through it before pushing it over to Hoover, “Please take a look, Master Hoover. If you find no issue with it, I’m fine as well.”

Hoover gazed at the ceiling, completely oblivious to the discussions between the two. The interruption from Leon annoyed him, and he just signed the document without even a glance, “I just got an idea for an exquisite spell! Do whatever you want, don’t disturb me. Is there anything else?”

Theodore and Leon exchanged glances, “No, that is all.”

Hoover immediately stood up, “Good, I’ll be leaving!”

Theodore stood up, “Master Hoover, the situation right now is complicated. Could you work on your research in Lausanne? Your tower is very far; even if anything happens, you might not be able to rush back in time.”

Hoover snorted, “The crude laboratories here don’t meet my requirements at all! I have to return. If there’s a day that I don’t keep an eye on those dwarves, they’ll slack off.”

Having said this, the mage refused to pay attention to any further attempts as he pushed the door open to leave. Only Leon and Theodore were left in the meeting room, the temperature dropping.

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The second month of summer was a month of unrest in the Sequoia Kingdom.

The Mage Association had suddenly captured Earl Burr, planning to put him on trial for breaking their monopoly on the trade of enchanted items. This was the most powerful noble that they had captured in history, and a huge challenge to the entire aristocracy. True nobles possessed almost complete sovereignty within the Sequoia Kingdom; even the royal army had to notify them before passing through. This was even more true for independent nobles like Burr, who could easily become vassals of a different country.

Secondly, the great success of the Bloodstained Highway had given the Kingdom a new understanding of the value of the Bloodstained Lands. They found that there was blood everywhere on the soil, but there was also gold strewn around as well. Every item brought back from Forgefires could make anyone go crazy, and all they had to send was food!

But it was the last shock that was the greatest. Richard had officially challenged the Mage Association to war, not as a mage but as a noble!

While many had guessed that the dealer who had sold to Earl Burr was Richard, but with the Association not accusing him directly it had yet to affect him. Still, he had jumped straight out and intervened in a powerful way.

Richard publicly gathered his army, commanding the Mage Association to release Earl Burr immediately. They had to repeal all laws against selling enchanted equipment in bulk for both him and Earl Burr's territory, and on top of that had to stop inflating the price of magic materials on the market.

If not, in his own words, "I don't mind using the blood of the mages to dye Lake Niwa red!"



## Book 3, Chapter 151 - Advance

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Richard's demands were absolutely unacceptable to the Mage Association, and that was what he wanted as well. He wanted the war to be unavoidable.

He had already shown his talent as a tactician during the Bloodstained Highway project, However, the Mage Association was no ordinary organisation. Just the thought of sixteen grand mages would leave anyone with a heavy heart; even the nobles who had followed Richard through his campaign in the Bloodstained Lands were not optimistic of his chances this time.

The smarter ones thought he was posturing so he could retreat more gracefully, his final motive being to talk things out with the Mage Association and settling on a compromise. This was a normal thing in politics. However, the declaration from the Association Chairman the next day utterly crushed these conjectures. Theodore's statement was concise and left no loopholes, "The Mage Association will go all out to annihilate those who disrupt the order!"

Richard himself thought nothing of it, merely asking the nobles of the Sequoia Kingdom for access to their roads. He wanted to move freely in his fight against the Association, and any who hindered his army would be considered enemies.

Within a few days, the flames of war began to rage within the Sequoia Kingdom. The scale of this sudden war was huge, affecting many people. Io was burning with excitement, the fanatic battle priest now feeling like Richard wasn't too much of an eyesore. The Mage Association themselves gathered an army of 40,000 men from thirty or so allied nobles, with an entire regiment of nearly 2,000 royal knights amongst them. Although the lieutenant in charge of the troops stated that they were acting of their own accord, it was quite obvious that this was a silent show of the King's support.

With the influence gathered by the Mage Association over the years, more than half of the Kingdom's nobles had joined their cause. This included many who had fought alongside Richard in the past; although they now had the profits of the trade route, they were not optimistic about his chances against the Association.

Unexpectedly, the three dukes maintained absolute silence. Even Duke Grasberg, who was closely related to the royal family, made no move.

When the Mage Association formed its alliance, Richard immediately sent people back to Bluewater to monitor the nobles there. He informed them that all military power in the city would be requisitioned; the nobles could bow out, but to do so they would have to abandon all their weapons and horses before returning to their territories. No prisoners would be taken if a resistance was put up. One could remain neutral in this war, but if they wanted to do so they would have to lose all offensive strength.

Most of the nobles in Bluewater had fought beside him in the past, and his power had long since left a deep-rooted fear within them. Many chose to watch on as neutral parties, but still there was a small number who were overconfident in their might. Richard and his subordinates were not in the oasis city, only leaving behind Flowsand who was just a girl. Thus, they brazenly chose to resist.

Flowsand personally joined this battle, fighting the rebels with a hundred humanoid knights. The drones charged back and forth a few times to utterly decimate an enemy three times their size, only losing a handful to wipe out every single enemy. This did speak of the drones' power, but it was mostly due to the torrent of divine spells protecting them. She had been left behind to teach them exactly how much of an effect a powerful cleric could have in smaller battles.

Once the situation was stabilised, Flowsand took the remaining troops and left to join up with Richard. Only a thousand or so

former slaves had been left behind to guard, the nobles present outnumbering them ten to one. However, the death of the vanguard had cowed the rebellion completely. Killing these guards would be easy, but how would they deal with Richard's vengeance? On top of that, Bluewater still had a council full of Richard's allies. The Golden Warflag, Demon Hunting Spears and the like would keep an eye on the place.

Richard himself started reorganising his army. There were some nobles in his camp, but they numbered less than ten and only four had any real power. Outside of Baron Schachter, it was Viscount Zim who sided with him resolutely. The pale, fat slob was now like a bull in mating season, jumping around and clamouring that he wanted to feed the old mages to the demons of the abyss. He seemed even more agitated than Richard himself.

Still, Zim wasn't a Viscount for nothing. He brought out all of the soldiers from his territory, not even leaving a basic defensive force, and even captured a hundred Golden Eagles. Using his own safety as a bargaining chip, he got them to obey orders.

Outside of that, although the Marquess of Strength Anrick hadn't publicly declared his position Rolf was still following by Richard's side. Following the swordsman were all of Anrick's forces in the Bloodstained Lands; the saint's faith had long since tied him to Richard's warship.

Lastly, Richard's most powerful and also surprising ally was actually Countess Katrina. She didn't just support him publicly, also personally leading 5,000 elite soldiers armed to their teeth to join Richard's camp.

The Countess participated in the name of protecting the father of her future child. No matter what, she would not give up her hope of having a child with the unicorn bloodline. This was understandable, but what left Richard speechless was the fact that she said she admired his lineage as well. To ensure her child was outstanding, she wouldn't mind letting him have a go as well.

But Richard did.

Katrina's participation meant there were more external soldiers in Richard's army than his own troops. This didn't align perfectly with his plans; if they wouldn't listen to his commands it would be better for him to fight alone. His army was thus organised quite simply: he separated the soldiers from the nobles into numerous 2,000-strong regiments, each headed by a crimson-armoured knight. The troops only needed to obey the knight, whether it was during marches or in battle. He personally took some of his troops and charged straight towards Lausanne.

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Troops were still gathering at Lausanne. The war had come too suddenly for the Mage Association, and the alliance had too many people. Only two-thirds of the participating nobles managed to rush to the meeting in time, and the army itself wasn't completely mobilised.

Richard's territory was less than 400 kilometres away from the Association's headquarters. He had advanced very quickly, covering 150 kilometres in four days. Six fiefs had been passed along the way, and regardless of the strength of their lords or their ability in command, they had been destroyed in the blink of an eye. The only exception was a baron directly subordinate to one of the three dukes, who just accepted the token fee for borrowing his roads and left Richard to move on.

Richard's momentum immediately left these mages in disarray. The Association's elders and the nobles were still arguing over command, but with the immense pressure of the impending war they hastily chose grand mage Jack to be the general with the assistance of two others. The nobles elected the lieutenant of the royal knights from their end to be second in command.

The Association sent out dozens of mages to assist, while the Church of Valour also dispatched a squad of twenty as well.

However, outside of a single level 14 priest, the rest were all clerics who weren't even level 6. In such a large battle, they were almost useless.

The alliance hurriedly came up with a grand army of 30,000 to face Richard's attack, sending out 500 light cavalymen and 2,000 infantry as the vanguard. When Richard's spearhead of 200 knights met this troop, they immediately turned tail and ran. Seeing that they had an advantage in numbers and were faster as well, the 500 light cavalymen pursued vehemently and quickly left the footsoldiers behind. They were never heard from ahead.

The first battle of the war had been lost, but that still didn't alarm Jack. Instead, he was furious, cursing at the uselessness of the royal lieutenant. This was because one of the lieutenant's subordinates had been in charge of the vanguard. The Association's troops continued to advance, but the vanguard was now 3,000 strong.

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Richard was stopped on a tall mountain, watching the enemy troops on the horizon. Next to his small unicorn were two huge warhorses, their backs alone nearly two metres long. They were completely black, fine purplish scales dotting their necks and bodies. On the heads of these horses were bent horns; unlike the long, slender cone of the unicorn, they looked far more demonic.

Atop these magic horses were Gangdor and Tiramisu, who had finally gotten rid of their fate of running behind the army. The ogre mage buffed his eyesight with a spell before looking over the distance, speaking in a low, hoarse voice, "Just 3,000 of them. Master, let's end them!"

"The one in charge is a saint," Richard smiled, "And there's also a grand mage amongst them."

"Faelor's saints are nothing!" Gangdor spat on the ground, brandishing his giant axe, "My axe is thirsty for... Umm..."

## Book 3, Chapter 152 - Showdown

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Gangdor stopped in the middle of his blustering, realising that a fight with a Faelor saint could end either way. His epic axe could drink the blood of the enemy, but the same held true either way. Although he liked boasting, he wasn't one to shoot his own mouth off.

Richard couldn't help but laugh, "The only one of us who can destroy a saint alone is Waterflower. You're still not that powerful."

Gangdor scratched his head in embarrassment, "Am I... Am I in too much of a hurry to prove myself?"

Richard just shook his head, "You're not even in the same conversation when it comes to runes. This... how do I put it... You can't make up for it yet. The Guide of Secrets is my best accomplishment to date, but it's a seven rune set. You don't have so many positions on your body, and your carrying capacity isn't comparable to hers."

"Then forget it," the brute replied resentfully, "Hmph! Bullying a little girl isn't so great anyway. I'll fight you next time, Tiramisu!"

"Deal!" The ogre laughed, "I'll fight you when I get my second head. Don't worry, it won't be long!"

Gangdor was dumbstruck for a while, and all that followed was a curse, "Damn you!"

"Alright, get serious! All of you will be in charge of your own planes in the future, so take the opportunity to learn to lead. Why am I letting them go?" Richard pointed at the 3,000 men in the distance, "That fish is too small!"

Richard was on the constant retreat over the next few days, seemingly afraid of the powerful vanguard of the alliance. However, this meant Jack's troops didn't get any glamorous fights.

Although Richard's army had quite a few footsoldiers, their speed left the grand mage flabbergasted. No matter what methods they thought up, the Mage Association's troops just couldn't catch up to his forces.

The only plausible way was to have the cavalry break away from the main army and strike alone.

However, this proposal immediately caused a dispute amongst those in charge. The lieutenant of the royal knights was firm in his decision not to divide the troops, bringing up countless instances where Richard had punished such stupidity. He argued that it was all a scheme to divide their army so Richard could dance around them.

On the other hand, Jack coldly threw a stack of papers in the lieutenant's face, "We have 7,000 cavalymen, and Richard has less than 6,000 soldiers combined in his main army. Do you really think 7000 men and 2,000 royal knights won't be able to beat 6,000 footsoldiers? Even a fool can see our absolute advantage in forces. You're saying you can't even win this, was your brain eaten by pigs?"

The lieutenant was level 17, and the humiliation turned his resolute face red and then purple. He suppressed his fury as best he could, but his voice still held an uncontrollable tremble within it, "The problem isn't the ratio of forces, it's the likelihood of a trap. Richard is definitely hoping for us to split up our forces."

"Fine, then tell me this. Where is his trap?" Jack questioned overbearingly.

"Richard wants to split our army apart, focusing his most powerful troops to surround and annihilate our cavalry."

Jack laughed in an exaggerated manner, "Do you really think he is some god of war? Take a look before saying anything else!"

The lieutenant picked up the papers Jack had thrown over,

scanning through it. Listed out on it was Richard's current military situation in an extremely detailed manner, the only exclusions being the recent set of humanoid knights from the broodmother who hadn't shown up in Bluewater at all. After the army came information about basically all of Richard's followers, including name, class, and level. Then there were the mages and clerics, but with their individual levels not being amazing the only detail was the number at each level.

Based on this alone, Richard really wasn't much to fear. The only powerhouse worth looking at was Rolf, but this was a familiar name within the Sequoia Kingdom that was acknowledged to be rather weak for a saint. Viscount Zim and Countess Katrina would be a little more troubling, but that was only because of their status. They just had to be left alive.

Richard's soldiers had all been slaves only a few months ago. How much power could a slave army even have?

"Do you see it, my saint vice-general? Are your 7,000 cavalrymen and 2,000 royal knights not enough to deal with 5,000 former slaves? I really wonder how you became a saint. Is it that you fellows are only heroes on the stomachs of your women, that you don't even dare to square up for a fight against slaves?" Jack's words were scathing.

The lieutenant's entire face twitched; he had no idea how he managed to endure the urge to punch Jack's face. He didn't actually know how ambitious Jack was. The grand mage's primary desire was to show off in this battle, changing his red robes to dark gold.

He had paid an enormous price to get the position of general of the allied armies. It wasn't just a formality; as long as he won, Leon promised to make him vice-chairman after wresting control from Theodore.

The lieutenant's hands trembled in speechlessness. There truly



was no way to lose given the information on this piece of paper, but if battles were won based on numbers alone even a pig could be a general. However, he knew exactly why he was participating in this war in his 'own' capacity. He could ignore Jack, but given such an obvious advantage in strength he couldn't explain himself to his true master if he still refused to send out the troops.

Jack pulled out a map and marked down a part of it, "I've made the calculations. As long as we mobilise the entire cavalry, we'll be able to catch up to Richard's main forces in this region. The land is flat for a dozen kilometres in all directions, so even if he plans to ambush us we will have a minimum of three hours to react. Is that not enough for you to wipe out 5,000 slaves?"

The lieutenant could not refute, but his instincts kept yelling that things would not be so simple. How could Richard be able to defeat Salwyn with fewer troops if he didn't have his ways? This was SALWYN! The Prince would be able to crush the Mage Association before they even knew what was going on!

Jack jabbed at the map, "That's it! Gather all the cavalry, we pursue at full force! Eliminate Richard's main forces at the Sunset Plains; even if he sets up an ambush, we can destroy his main army and gobble up the rest. That should teach him!"

The nobles present in the meeting all cheered and parroted the grand mage's decision. The course had been set.

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The very next day, the allied army gathered all 7,000 cavalrymen and began to pursue Richard's troops in full force. However, the first contact wasn't as simple as imagined. It took them a full day's chase to close a gap of a few dozen kilometres, and by the time they were anywhere close it was already night. After an entire day's charge, the allied soldiers were all out of stamina. Although Jack was anxious for a fight, he still had to rest and just send a squad of scouts to keep track of Richard's men.

What Jack couldn't see was a few battalions moving to surround them in the night. These men arrived at predetermined locations and set up camp to rest, while the main forces moved a dozen kilometres away and began to recuperate as well.

Looking from a bird's eye view, one could see that Richard's flanks were like sharp spears pointed at the Sunset Plains. This battlefield hadn't been Jack's choice to make.

.....

The seventh day of the second month of summer was fated to be the most important in the Sequoia Kingdom's history. The Mage Association's soldiers finally caught up to Richard's army at the Sunset Plains, and he finally gave up on running and organised his men to fight despite the numerical disadvantage.

A thousand metres away, Jack couldn't help but lick his dry lips in excitement, telling the lieutenant, "Attack! Take this chance to defeat them!"

Although he hated the grand mage, the lieutenant had no choice but to go all out. He waved his hand and a thousand royal knights broke out of the army, slowly charging towards Richard's front line.

Richard smiled from atop his unicorn, "They're actually using their most powerful elites from the start. Looks like this fight will be easier than I expected."

The distance was quickly reduced to a mere 300 metres. These 1,000 knights were all elites above level 7, the lances in their hands seven metres long and a hundred kilograms in weight. A full-power attack from these weapons could poke a hole through heavy infantry with tower shields!

However, when they approached the 100-metre point, Richard's heavy infantry suddenly scattered. A few hundred light infantrymen charged to the front and half-knelt on the ground,

pointing strange weapons with bowl-sized muzzles at the incoming charge.

“Dwarven muskets! Why are there so many?!” Jack’s pupils shrank, but as well-read as he was he immediately shook his head, “It’s fine, guns aren’t strong enough to break through the armour of the royal knights.”

However, the lieutenant did not think the same. The moment he saw hundreds of guns, his expression darkened. He immediately rushed to the front lines and yelled at the top of his lungs, having the second wave of knights rush out.

Hundreds of explosions rang out at the same time, spewing smoke and fire everywhere. Only a few dozen royal knights were shot off their horses, but the loud rumble startled all their warhorses.

## Book 3, Chapter 153 - Showdown(2)

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The Sequoia Kingdom's warhorses were fitted with special helmets meant to dampen the sound of nearby explosions or any magic. These beasts were also trained to overcome their natural fear of fire. However, the thundering sound and thick smoke from hundreds of muskets going off at once far surpassed any ordinary spell. Many of the horses reared up and threw off their riders, while even more slowed down and started turning in place.

The hundreds who fell were fated to be crippled, if not killed in the midst of the stampede. However, that wasn't even the worst part: the effect of the casualties was dwarfed by the loss of speed. With less than a hundred metres left, these heavy cavalrymen wouldn't be able to regain the momentum for an effective charge.

Several hundred axes flew out from behind Richard's infantry, finding their marks on the heads of those knights who were too occupied with calming their steeds. Another few hundred fell, and the gunmen took the time to discard the used muskets and fire another volley from the guns on their backs.

Another thunderous boom rang out as a few dozen knights flew off their mounts. More importantly, the horses that had been calmed down were frightened once more. Even the second wave charging in from behind was obstructed.

The first attack of the alliance, its most formidable, was almost completely nullified. While a few exceptional riders managed to avoid their fallen comrades and reach Richard's front line, the charge didn't manage anything at all. At the front of the army were barbarians with heavy shields. These herculean men might not be able to stop a full charge, but this disorganised attack was stopped and the knights bogged down in a melee.

The situation instantly devolved into chaos.

Jack's face turned a ghastly pale, the same as the lieutenant's. He

had never imagined that former slaves could be so ferocious, and finally realised Richard's army wasn't as weak as it appeared. The glow of magic and divine spells on the warriors was enough indication of the sheer power of Richard's clergy and mage corps; their strength was far beyond what the information sheet made it seem. With so many clerics and mages, even a slave could become a war machine!

In addition, the constant chant of Richard's bard assaulted the alliance's morale. Olar could now support all the soldiers within fifty metres of him, far exceeding others of his level. His own contribution to the army's strength was catching up to Io's.

The lieutenant could only grumble to himself about Jack's stupidity. How could the fool assume Neian's clergy could compare in any way to this force of mages and clerics? Even an idiot would know that number wasn't everything. The divine glow of the opposing priests and clerics made it clear that the Church of Valour would be soundly crushed.

With his keen senses, Jack could feel something was amiss. However, he couldn't tell exactly what it was. Consequences be damned, he bypassed the lieutenant's command and ordered everyone outside of the 500 guards to engage the enemy. A bloodbath ensued on the open plains.

The lieutenant stared intently at the thousands of unmoving humanoid knights behind Richard's lines, his eyes twitching constantly.

That was when the nightmare began. The ground suddenly quaked, a cloud of dust appearing in the distance. Five full battalions of cavalrymen appeared at the edges of the battlefield, closing in quickly.

The lieutenant didn't need to check that they were Richard's troops. Still, they were only ten minutes into the battle! The only way for this to happen was if these forces were ready an hour ago,

but how was that even possible? Wouldn't it make Richard an all-seeing god?

Even the gods couldn't possibly be omnipotent. While the lieutenant was still wondering how to act, Richard's army suddenly switched to the offensive. Thousands of cavalymen formed a deluge of steel that surged straight towards the core of Jack's army.

The knights and cavalymen of the alliance attempted to stop them in their path, but just the first clash killed off a good portion of the defenders. Even the royal knights could not compare to Richard's humanoids, a level difference only supplemented by the gap in equipment. Most of the alliance weapons were cut apart by the knights' halberds in the initial clash, leading to a gory death!

The defensive line of 500 knights was cut through like a roll of cheese. Gangdor and Tiramisu became the spearhead of the charge, not even bothering to fight their enemies 'properly'; simple swings of their weapons sent their targets flying away, mounts included.

The momentum of thousands of humanoid knights charging in unison was unstoppable, to the point that even the lieutenant who regularly saw the Kingdom's war games found it breathtaking. Richard seemed to remain fully alert in the midst of all these knights, as though he was the sole focus of this battle. This was the air of a true superior.

Jack saw the enemy mage point at him from several hundred metres away, turning his thumb downwards and moving it across his throat. He immediately grew furious, jumping off his horse with staff in hand as he prepared to teach Richard a lesson. The overconfident kid was only level 13; he wouldn't be able to change his fate in the face of a powerful grade 8 spell.

However, the lieutenant would allow no such thing. If Richard's wave of knights wasn't stopped, they would completely smash through the weak core of the army. It would be a complete

disaster.

The man let out a mighty roar, his entire body glowing as his muscles swelled up to twice their prior size. He led several dozen men in a desperate charge towards Richard's assault.

"A saint? Interesting!" Richard seemed to relish the moment, "ROLF! He's all yours!"

"Worry not!" the saint swordsman would once have fled at the sight of this lieutenant, but with a War Construct scroll and his new rune he wasn't a coward anymore.

"There are two more saints. Tammy, take care of one!" Tammy roared violently, his aggression evident for all to see as he charged straight towards the enemy.

"Boss, there's one more!" Gangdor was itching to fight.

However, Richard would not grant him the chance, "Bury him with knights!"

Gangdor felt somewhat disappointed, but that was nothing in comparison to the distress felt by the saint Richard had designated. That man saw hundreds of knights in spear formation barrelling towards him, his mouth starting to twitch as he nearly fled the battlefield. With his wealth of experience, he naturally knew that his individual strength wouldn't mean anything if he were to be surrounded. Their overpowering strength and coordination would leave the chances of survival unusually slim.

"RICHARD!" an unusual roar rose above the battlefield, the volume enhanced so greatly due to magic. Every pair of eyes immediately landed on the source of the voice, only to see Jack with his staff raised and levitating in mid-air, "I am here, come and fight me!"

The grand mage signalled for all of his bodyguards and the two other grand mages to distance themselves, hovering alone in mid-air and gazing down upon the battlefield. The message was

evident: this would be a duel between mages with no interference from their subordinates.

“You’re a grand mage!” Richard replied in his own augmented voice, “Can I bring another to fight alongside me?”

The corners of Jack’s mouth curled downwards, nearly forming a right angle with his chin. He called out in a clearly ancient voice, “Of course! I am a red-robed elder of the Mage Association. You can choose any second you want, even Rolf!”

Richard laughed, “Flowsand, let’s go!”

The grand mage grew furious at the sight of Flowsand. “You call upon a girl to fight me, a mere level 12 child? How dare you!”

Richard had already begun manoeuvring his unicorn, its horn pointed straight at the grand mage. “Let’s see if you can survive this first, you old fool!” he said with a laugh.

Jack didn’t continue to waste his breath. He began a chant the moment Richard was in range, words rapid but clear. A grade 8 spell would be unleashed in less than three seconds, something that left even his two fellow elders surprised and envious. They had known he was formidable, but not to such a degree.

But then, Richard stunned everyone present. He took out a tome with a copper cover and flipped it open, sending a burst fireball flying forth with a wave of his hand.

An instant cast of a grade 7 spell? Wouldn’t that mean Richard could cast grade 9 spells? Jack’s eyes bulged, but he didn’t have the time to be furious about the lacking intelligence. He immediately interrupted his chant and began weaving barriers without end. His prior defences could only withstand grade 6 spells or below, just enough to face off against a normal level 13 mage, Who could have expected Richard to send forth a burst fireball with just a wave?

The flames of a burst fireball differed from those of normal ones, burning bright yellow and surpassing the normal ones in



temperature and explosive might. Before the blaze of the first explosion even faded away, Richard continued to flip through the Book of Holding and sent two more hurtling in his opponent's direction. There was almost no gap between them!

Jack screamed in shock and rage. He would never have expected Richard to be able to instantly cast grade 7 spells. He himself couldn't insta-cast a single one, forget three in rapid succession.

These three fireballs would blow away all of his defences. They were not enough to kill him, but they would leave him with severe injuries.

## Book 3, Chapter 154 - Breaking The Enemy

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“Flowsand!” Richard called out after launching the three burst fireballs, and a divine glow immediately fell upon him. He started casting more fireballs, and although they were ordinary ones they streamed out at an unbelievable rate. Seven or eight fireballs shot out in a straight line to cover the hundred metres between him and Jack.

The two other grand mages didn’t have to see the outcome to know that nothing would be left behind. Of course, Richard could tell the same. He turned the moment the eighth fireball left his hands, pointing the next towards one of the two while laughing.

“RICHARD!” a voice howled as it was consumed by the inferno.

A total of eleven fireballs instantly poured down onto this new target. A scream of desperation rang out as a storm of mana instantly put out the blaze, the mage staggering out from the embers before falling to the ground only a few steps away. He was the very definition of haggard; skin burnt while his hair, brows, and beard, were practically all gone. Even a good portion of his robes had been scorched.

The grand mage hadn’t expected Richard to even be able to attack him out of the blue, forget this flood of fireballs that defied everything he knew about magic. Fortunately, his status gave him some support. His robe’s defences had been activated in the nick of time, and a barrier cast from a scroll had borne the brunt of the assault.

Richard felt exhausted by now. Looking at the charred grand mage, he felt a pang of pity; he wanted to end the man’s life with a coup de grace. But then he felt a strong magical disturbance in the middle of the battlefield. A portal appeared mid-air and Jack emerged from within, losing his balance and landing pitifully on the ground.

“A dimension shift! Damn it, he escaped!” Richard couldn’t help but yell. However, Jack fared no better than the grand mage who was nearly cooked alive. His brief shift had allowed him to survive, but the three initial burst fireballs had severely wounded him.

“Guards! Kill Richard!” Jack no longer cared about his decorum and reputation, face contorting as he howled madly. Richard was now a distance away from his own bodyguards, so the allied knights quickly surrounded him.

Richard shook his head, leaping onto the unicorn and helping Flowsand up behind him. Facing the mad charge of the opponents, he laughed and flipped open the Book of Holding.

A bright glow covered the battlefield, and twelve raptors that were each fiercer than a direbear flashed into existence. They entered a proper semicircle formation, barring the path to Richard. Their breaths frightened the alliance’s warhorses as they tore into the enemy ranks with a growl. A single bite and shake from those powerful jaws tore off chunks of flesh from the riders’ legs or their mounts, the heavy armour unable to do a thing.

With the raptors holding off the enemy, Richard immediately retreated to his camp. The unicorn finally showed exactly why it was such a mythical beast, running at full speed even with two riders on its back. It was moving faster than even the best warhorses could at a full gallop.

At this point, the grand mage who had just experienced a brush with death pointed at the Book of Holding in Richard’s hands, his voice trembling, “A divine artefact! That’s a divine artefact!”

A divine artefact! Almost nobody could help turning around for a look, even Jack who was retreating. The fires of desire raged in the grand mage’s eyes, evident for all to see. A divine artefact could spark a war between two nations, regardless of its grade. Jack couldn’t resist such a temptation. Utterly bested in the duel, he found himself a silver lining. Losing to a divine artefact was far

better than losing to a level 13 mage.

Faced with the greed of the allied forces, Richard could only sneer. That forced Jack to recognise the severity of the situation: forget seizing the artefact, even survival and escape would be a problem.

The entire perimeter had been blockaded, a crimson knight each leading the five battalions in a charge towards the allied cavalry that was tied down by Richard's main force. There was no hope of shaking them off.

Tired as he was, retreated to the rear. However, he remained in command of all his troops.

The central formation guarding the three mages fought back at all costs, 500 of the Kingdom's best knights engaging in a bloody battle against the same number of humanoids. Several hundred other humanoid knights arranged themselves into tight formations, cutting through the royal soldiers with almost no effort.

Richard kept his eye on this battle. Once the last grand mage summoned a meteor to strike down a dozen humanoids, he knew his opportunity had arrived. "IO!" he roared, simultaneously sending an order from his mind.

The battle priest answered the call and emerged from the fray, only to see Gangdor roaring like a beast in the middle of a charge towards the enemy's core. Five strange knights were arranged in a packed formation behind him, following closely. Six imposing magical mounts shook the earth, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake.

There was a faint glow on the bodies of the five knights, extending from the breastplate to their steeds. The sharp lines of light formed images of light, those who were sharp-eyed able to tell that these images were perfectly identical.

Io was excited at the prospect of such a daring charge, howling at the top of his lungs. An unknown amount of blessings rained down on the strike force in an instant, equalling multiple grade 2 runes at the least.

Seeing the situation deteriorate, the knight leading the central formation roared madly and charged towards Gangdor. The brute laughed loudly, brandishing his axe. He clamped his legs together and his steed leapt into the air, putting the full weight of itself and its master behind the next attack.

The knight captain yelled loudly as he manoeuvred his spear to parry Gangdor's slash. A powerful bright light burst forth from his body in that instant; this was another powerful saint. However, although he managed to withstand the strike his mount could not. The horse underneath him neighed in pain, collapsing instantly.

The recoil from the blow sent Gangdor's mount tumbling a few steps backwards, while the brute's arms grew numb from the impact. He still couldn't fight a saint head-on.

However, two more knights swiftly streamed in from beside Gangdor, their spears aimed at the enemy. The captain felt an extreme sense of danger and bellowed, trying to parry the oncoming strikes, but the knights let out a war cry that focused a green light on their speartips, coalescing their energies into a blinding flash. The captain felt the power of the attacks double, and could only watch helplessly as his weapon flew out of his hands. The two knights then buried their spears into his ribs, one on each side.

Gangdor quickly followed up, taking off the man's head with a swing of his axe.

With the saint now dead, nobody could hope to hold off this charge. With Gangdor at the helm, these knights pierced through the alliance lines like a hot knife through butter, coming through on the other side with dozens of bodies in their wake. The enemy

troops were left in a pathetic state, unable to offer any serious resistance at all.

Gangdor howled wildly, twirling his axe in the air and shaking off a stream of fresh blood. He turned his mount around, charging into the enemy formation once more. The five knights remained in formation, following him back in.

This time, Gangdor's axe was aimed at the last healthy grand mage. His target was immediately so terrified that he didn't even bother to attack, casting a flight spell and taking to the air to flee.

Although this force was small, it was the first use of rune knights in Faelor.

The mage knew flying above a battlefield was an extremely dumb move that would make him a live target for numerous mages and archers. However, he did not care; in the middle of his terror, his only concern was fleeing from this hell.

Busy maintaining the war chant, Olar couldn't react in time to fire his arrows. However, Richard now had more than a dozen mages in his employ. Several colourful spells immediately streaked across the sky, crashing into the flying grand mage. Slows, numbness, insanity, silence, poison... A myriad of curses rained down on this enemy, with even a few divine spells thrown in. Io had instantly cast three spells to stop the man, while Flowsand had cast two. Richard's men were all some combination of experienced, cunning, and clever. They knew well how to prevent a target from fleeing.

The grand mage immediately stopped in mid-air, his body thrashing about in the wind as he suffered the numerous spells assaulting him. It was at this point that a ball of grey light flew towards him from Richard's direction.

This dispel did not differentiate between friend and foe. It cured the mage of most of his ailments, but it also cancelled the flight spell he had cast. The fellow screamed as he plummeted to the

ground from thirty metres in the sky. Given the physique of Faelor's mages, he would likely be severely injured.

The outcome of the battle was set in stone. Seven thousand cavalrymen were surrounded by 16,000 men. The humanoid knights had the advantage in numbers, level, equipment, and tactics, massacring the weak enemy. Gangdor led the rune knights to destroy any pockets of resistance, crushing their formation with overwhelming might. This small force was unstoppable as they swept through the battlefield.

The lieutenant of the royal family stood motionless in the middle of the battlefield. "It's over," Richard said softly as Waterflower pulled the Shepherd of Eternal Rest from his body.

Indeed, it was. The allied forces had been annihilated in the battle at the Sunset Plains, only a few hundred of the 7,000 cavalrymen managing to escape. The alliance had also lost four powerful saints and two grand mages, another taken as a prisoner of war after suffering severe injuries.

This battle spread Richard's name far and wide.

## Book 3, Chapter 155 - The First Magic War

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If there was anything at all during the battle in the Sunset Plains that annoyed Richard, it occurred in the last moments of the fight. A golden pillar of light charged into the air, milky white divine runes dancing around its silent imposition. Io had reached level 15.

The battle priest had obviously done it on purpose. Even an ascension to level 19 would not be so majestic. However, Richard didn't really care about him anymore. Although the fellow seemed to have some secret intentions regarding Flowsand, he truly was indispensable in battle. He could have his fame; Richard's mind had already shifted to developing his astral affinity further.

The cavalry of the alliance was composed of elite soldiers from numerous nobles. While Richard had the upper hand, it was much harder to kill them all than to just defeat them. He had suffered over a thousand losses in order to annihilate this enemy. However, this was completely worth it; the Mage Association was now a snake with its fangs removed, its footsoldiers nothing to worry about. The only issue was the thirteen grand mages still watching over them.

He was in no hurry to advance once the battle was won. He announced that he would accept the surrender of the enemy nobles; even if they had just gotten to the battlefield, any willing to side with him would be accepted without discrimination. Richard gave these nobles three days to consider the offer; once their time was up, he would not be able to guarantee their safety if they still sided with the Association.

This declaration caused another huge uproar in the Sequoia Kingdom. Very few of the nobles who had rallied behind the Mage Association actually benefited from them; the grand mages just had a hand at their throats. The Association's might had been burnt into their hearts over many centuries.



Enchanted armour and weapons were the most powerful equipment on Faelor. If the channels of purchase were blocked off, the combined battle might of the Sequoia Kingdom would plummet. This could not be made up for without enough wealth to purchase these things from other channels. The only nobles who could remain neutral were those who had enough individual power to ignore the Association's demands.

There was no lack of nobles who personally approved of Richard's challenge to the Mage Association's authority. However, the stand of a family wasn't affected purely by agreeability. In a world where might made right, the laws were set by the powerful. At least before the battle at the Sunset Plains, Richard didn't seem to have any chances of victory. Nobody had expected things to turn out this way.

The nobles in the allied army were left in turmoil. Some argued amongst themselves, others accused each other, and even more were secretly trying to make moves under the table. However, that last group was set up for disappointment; Richard refused to accept any secret deals unless the nobles were willing to become double agents.

Three days later, Richard signalled for his army to advance. This time he only brought his cavalry and the extremely flexible barbarian warriors, as well as the throwers. They marched 150 kilometres in one day, wiping out four nobles who had sworn loyalty to the Mage Association. The thousands of soldiers on the defence were utterly defeated, two barons and a titled knight becoming Richard's slaves. The women in their families were turned into prostitutes, sold off and distributed amongst those who followed him.

When asked about this decision, Richard merely said, "My enemies shouldn't even think about preserving any dignity!"

This was a cruel decision, and an intimidating one. When it reached the ears of grand mage Leon, the vice-chairman of the

Mage Association smashed everything in sight.

“THAT FELLOW ISN’T FIT TO BE A NOBLE!” Leon’s shouts resounded throughout the building. He hadn’t expected that his methods of stirring up trouble couldn’t even compare to Richard’s. Under this matchless intimidation, most of the Sequoia Kingdom’s nobles turned neutral in a single night.

The three Dukes continued their silence, but everyone knew that Bevry was Richard’s lord. Richard’s unyielding nature and viciousness obviously had the Direwolf Duke’s approval. Duke Hamilton, reputed for being a sly fox, was said to be in a secret alliance with the Direwolf Duke. He could join Richard’s cause at any time as well.

As for Bevry’s mortal enemy, Duke Grasberg, his direct vassals had maintained neutrality but some others had joined the alliance. The relationship between the royal family and the Duke was quite intricate, but the man was now in a very awkward situation. An extremely important member of his family, Viscount Zim, had grown fiercely loyal to Richard. The psychologists in the Kingdom had all sorts of hypotheses about this, but most were just ridiculous. Whatever it was, Richard had a hundred Golden Eagles amongst his ranks.

Only six nobles remained at the Mage Association’s side; their army now numbered less than 20,000.

Leon was left on the verge of tears, but the royal family finally gave him a trace of hope. They broke their long silence, reinforcing him with 3,000 royal knights. However, this stand had come too late; it had basically no effect on the nobles who had already picked their sides. The entire kingdom was just watching on as they awaited a grand war.

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Leon personally took to the field, leading his 22,000 men against Richard’s army of 20,000 in a decisive battle at the Crimson Gorge.

Salwyn had once said that he had no confidence against Richard in a battle with similar numbers. Leon was a genius mage, but he couldn't compare to Salwyn in terms of leading troops. The prince had already proven himself in dozens of battles of varying scale; put bluntly, the two weren't even on the same level. However, Leon was too arrogant to think that way. He believed magic was greater than everything else in existence, and a genius mage understood the truth of the world. Commanding some soldiers would be nothing difficult, or so he thought as he led his troops to a massacre.

In reality, the humanoid knights ensured that Richard's forces actually held an advantage over the allied forces despite their numbers. Leon ended up watching in stupefaction as Richard's cavalry broke through his battle formation in one stroke, dashing any hopes he had in the royal knights. The outcome had been decided in the first attack.

Countess Katrina had shone brightly in this campaign. The tall, fit beauty with fair skin looked flashy as she rode her chariot out to war, her soft skin knocking a full ten years off her nearly thirty years of age. She led her soldiers from Richard's left flank, destroying any resistance she faced while Richard pierced through the centre of Leon's army. Her clear shouts rang through the battlefield as the huge army of 5,000 charged forward and cut off the allied soldiers' retreat!

No matter how useless Leon was, the sight of the Countess' vanguard and Richard's knights joining hands was enough for him to realise he had lost. The cruel mage was quite decisive, opening a randomised portal in the middle of the battlefield and escaping far away.

The battle at the Crimson Gorge had thus ended with the total defeat of the allied army. They had lost two more saints and two more grand mages over the course of the fight, 8,000 soldiers dead and over 10,000 taken prisoner. All 3,000 of the royal knights had

been killed in battle, not even one taken captive. Two-thirds of the Sequoia Kingdom's most elite cavalry had thus been wiped out, leaving the royal family in imminent danger.

While Richard had paid a price of nearly 4,000 warriors, he had crushed all of his enemies. The royal family would not be able to recover from their losses any time soon. This had been a stroke of luck; if someone competent had been in charge, it would have been extremely difficult to stop the royal knights and the many mages of the Association from coordinating an escape. He would have needed to pay a much larger price.

Now, he was one of the most powerful beings in the Sequoia Kingdom, standing shoulder to shoulder with the three dukes and what was left of the royal family. This left the power structure of the Kingdom in dire straits.

Leon had disappeared ever since the decisive battle, and power fell back into Theodore's hands. The first thing he did was to capture the two remaining grand mages loyal to Leon, using them to seek negotiations with Richard.

While grand mage Hoover was outstanding at level 18, he wisely chose not to state his opinion. No matter how powerful he was as an individual, he couldn't fight Richard's army on his own. Even if he had the support of a magic tower, Richard could just cut off all reinforcements and starve him out.

Besides, the news of Richard using a divine weapon to heavily injure Jack and another grand mage was slowly spreading. This forced the incomparably proud Hoover to swallow his rage; Leon's deductions had turned out wrong. Who else but a legendary mage could give their disciple divine weapons as equipment?

Richard made two requests in the face of Theodore's peace offering. One was for the Association to give up their monopoly on enchanted equipment, allowing him to freely dump his stock into the Sequoia Kingdom. The second was to make him a dark gold

mage, giving him the right to add any new members to the Association as he saw fit and employ any of its mages. He hadn't expected the Association to agree to such a request, but Theodore had nodded readily.

His war with the Mage Association thus ended in a huge victory. In the history of the Sequoia Kingdom, it would come to be known as the First Magic War.

## Book 3, Chapter 156 - Broken Ending

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Richard had basically destroyed the Mage Association, but he ended up allowing them to retain two-thirds of their profits in line with the nine remaining grand mages. They would likely have been taken apart in their dying state, so instead of leaving things be, he decided to usher in a new world order. That was why he had agreed to negotiations.

The damage to the Sequoia Kingdom's royal family was second only to that done to the Mage Association. The political hierarchy of the Kingdom was already broken, and Richard would never let go of such a good opportunity. He only returned a third of the land he had occupied on his route to Lausanne, leaving the remaining two-thirds in his possession. This made his fief comparable to that of a full marquess.

While some relatives or allies of the vanquished offered a bit of weak resistance, argument without war always ended just like with the Association's capture of Earl Burr; nothing would be accomplished.

When Bevry allowed Richard to skip ranks and directly granted him the title of viscount, all protests disappeared like the wind. The only reason a higher rank wasn't afforded was that it could only be done if he swore fealty to the royal family in name. Neither Richard nor the royal family were interested in something like that.

In the end, he found himself with no competitors in the Sequoia Kingdom. If any of the three dukes or even the royal family wished to go to war with him, he could completely and utterly destroy them. Facing all of them together would pose a problem, but that was an impossibility. Bevry and Duke Grasberg were still intricately tied to him in their own ways.

After the chaos of war came the time for the victors to split the

loot. This had always been one of Richard's strong suits, but for some reason he felt it incredibly dull. Watching the royal family suddenly grow active and the Mage Association compromise, seeing the looks of reverence and awe from those around him, he suddenly felt like the entire situation was rather hilarious and unreal. The war that had just passed was historic in the context of the Kingdom, but even just considering Faelor it was only a blip on the radar.

And what about outside of Faelor? The Sequoia Kingdom and Theodore had no idea what rune knights were. They knew not of Norland's existence, and even less of the Eternal Dragon. In the eyes of those above them, their struggles were nothing more than a joke.

However, he couldn't bring himself to laugh like that. If someone on the level of the old dragon was watching, was he not a joke as well? It was very likely so.

He had his followers take care of the chaos, taking his desolate feelings and the initial loot and quietly returning to Norland.

As was the norm, most of the spoils came in the form of metal and precious ores. Since many nobles who had participated in the Bloodstained Highway project had stood on the side of the Mage Association, he hadn't hesitated in wresting their portion away.

The ores and metals from the first caravan hadn't been transported back to the Kingdom yet, which was great for him. Almost none of the other nobles protested either; right now, all they cared for was keeping their own positions intact. If an increased share of profit was enough to calm Richard's ire, that was for the best.

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When he walked out of the teleportation gate, Richard couldn't help but feel like he was just in another part of Faelor. Sounds of a nonexistent battle still echoed within his ears.

Priestess Noelene had rushed over once more. Ever since she began cooperating with him, she had grown very enthusiastic. She was startled at his sight, but kept quiet until ten strong warriors walked out behind him. She signalled the clerics present to cast a mass vitality spell.

“You don’t look so good,” the priestess pointed out, looking at Richard with a hint of worry.

Richard shook his head, “I’m a young man with his worries. Don’t mind me, they’re just some random issues that will resolve themselves soon enough. Just take a look at the boxes and see what you need.”

Noelene looked into his eyes and stated earnestly, “Richard. Although we’re working together I hope you consider me a friend. Money isn’t everything to me; if I wish for it, there are many who are willing to share millions in profit with me.”

Richard knew she was speaking the truth. A powerful priestess of the Church of the Eternal Dragon had plenty of ways to earn money. However, her worry left him feeling at a loss. All he wanted was a place to be alone and calm his feelings down. He was still a youth less than nineteen years old, but he had experienced far more than his peers.

He ended up laughing wryly under her gaze, shrugging before spreading his arms open helplessly, “My beautiful sister Noelene, I’m just feeling a little suffocated. It’ll be better with time, don’t worry. Is it okay if I keep the reason a secret? Come, look at what I’ve brought for you!”

Richard hastily had the warriors open the chests as he spoke, revealing them to be packed to the brim with obsidian ingots. “Look, these are all yours!”

Noelene gave the box a cursory glance and turned to him again, “No, you’re quite different from before. What exactly happened?”



Richard glared back at her, “Miss Noelene, this is what happens with us youths. Things can be somewhat awkward at times, it’s only normal. I’ll get better when I grow up more. You are an elder, after all, you wouldn’t be able to understand the world of the youngsters!”

Noelene flushed red, filled up with a mixture of embarrassment and anger, “RICHARD! I dare you to say that again!”

Richard stuck his tongue out, obviously not so stupid as to actually repeat it. However, he had successfully distracted her. He just gave everything outside of the runes to the priestess, regardless of whether she actually needed them. Serious as ever, Noelene carefully checked the chests and decided to pay him two million. However, he was long gone by the time she looked up, leaving behind two free Archerons who were looking at her deferentially to deal with the follow-up.

It was late at night in Faust. By the time he returned to the floating island, almost everyone was asleep. The old steward put on a coat and rushed over the moment he received word, and Richard amiably told him to send a few bottles of strong wine to the study before going back to rest.

The wine arrived a short while later, but the one carrying it wasn’t any ordinary servant but the old butler himself. Seated behind his desk, Richard looked up in surprise, “It’s already late, please return to bed. The entire family relies on you to function.”

The old man placed the wine on a coffee table at the corner of the room, hesitating to speak up to his master, “Young Master, please drink a little less. Take care of your body.”

“I will,” Richard smiled.

The steward didn’t say any more, retreating from the room. He knew his place; now that he had said his piece, it was up to Richard to decide whether to listen or not.

Richard poured himself a full cup of wine, standing by the window and sipping it slowly. There was nothing in his mind at that moment—he had no idea what to think about. The only thing he felt was a strange annoyance and uneasiness.

The cup was fully drained before he only realised it; only when he was slightly drunk did he start to feel a little more lively. He had killed far too many people during this trip to Faelor. In the ten or so battles he had fought, tens of thousands had fallen before him.

In front of his followers, the battle priest, and more importantly the nobles of the Sequoia Kingdom, he would forever be that cheerful genius mage, witty and refined with a firm hand controlling everything. It was when alone that he became a mere eighteen-year-old. Youths of his age in other families were still dressing luxuriously, quick to form grudges. However, he had journeyed to the depths of the myriad planes and taken over the responsibility of his entire family.

He had first entered Faelor with no idea what to do. He hadn't even been able to motivate his subordinates properly. Constant smiles and measured speech had been a way to hide his nerves, every decision he took a product of endless thinking. With enemies everywhere and no way back home, he had been terrified of getting a single thing wrong. Every obstacle he faced was insurmountable.

He knew that one wrong decision or some bad luck would have left him dead in Faelor; he would have turned to dust in a foreign plane. It had put an indescribably heavy burden on his shoulders.

It was only now, having dealt an entire kingdom a heavy blow, using trade and runes to expand his wealth and make powerful allies, that a tiny bit of the tension was starting to fade. Recalling his journey over the past two years, he suddenly found that his path to the stars was formed of tens of thousands of skeletons.

He was human too. Seeing countless lives withering before his

eyes, he couldn't help but feel for them. Numerous experiences on the edge of death flashed past his own mind, the memories of these events extremely vivid. He had no idea when he would become one of those skeletons, a stepping stone that served to push someone else higher up the ladder.

These were thoughts he had been plagued with ever since the end of the First Magic War. However, now there was no aftermath to deal with. Alone in what had once been Gaton's study, many doubts began to appear in his mind.

What exactly was planar war? Why was it that outside of victor and vanquished, there was no third ending in the contact between two planes?

# Table of Contents

## [City of Sin](#)

[Synopsis](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 1 - Once Lazy And Luxurious](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 2 - Once Lazy And Luxurious\(2\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 3 - Once Lazy And Luxurious\(3\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 4 - The Pillar Crumbles](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 5 - The Pillar Crumbles\(2\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 6 - The Pillar Crumbles\(3\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 7 - Politics](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 8 - Ripples](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 9 - Ripples\(2\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 10 - Ugliness](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 11 - Ugliness\(2\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 12 - Knight](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 13 - Retreat](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 14 - Unable To Refuse](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 15 - Unable To Refuse\(2\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 16 - A Battle For Vengeance](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 17 - A Battle For Vengeance\(2\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 18 - Harvest](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 19 - Untitled](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 20 - Power](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 21 - Power\(2\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 22 - Power\(3\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 23 - Dedication](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 24 - Dedication\(2\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 25 - Dedication\(3\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 26 - A Change Of Fates](#)

[Book 2, Chapter 27 - Sacrifice](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 28 - Return](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 29 - Riot](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 30 - Temporary Tranquility](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 31 - Inheritance](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 32 - Inheritance\(2\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 33 - Inheritance\(3\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 34 - Halted](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 35 - Halted](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 36 - Subdue](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 37 - Subdue\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 38 - Confidence](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 39 - Glory](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 40 - Glory\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 41 - Glory\(3\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 42 - Glory\(4\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 43 - Just Youth](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 44 - Just Youth\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 45 - Sentence](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 46 - Sentence\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 47 - Test](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 48 - Twins of Destiny](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 49 - To Cherish](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 50 - To Cherish\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 51 - Revolt](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 52 - Revolt\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 53 - Revolt\(3\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 54 - War Of Attrition](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 55 - War Of Attrition\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 56 - War Of Attrition\(3\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 57 - That Man](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 58 - Never Alone](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 59 - A Horrifying List](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 60 - Lie](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 61 - Destiny Crystals](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 62 - Destiny Crystals\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 63 - Behind The Scenes](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 64 - Behind The Scenes\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 65 - Beye](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 66 - A Long Time](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 67 - Life's Bane](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 68 - Miscalculation](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 69 - Fight](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 70 - Prey](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 71 - Grit And Steel](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 72 - Grit And Steel\(2\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 73 - Grit And Steel\(3\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 74 - Your Future](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 75 - Bloodstained Highway](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 76 - Toppled](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 77 - Nightmares](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 78 - Hurts So Good](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 79 - Something Must Be Done!](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 80 - Accident](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 81 - Accident\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 82 - Darling of Destiny](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 83 - Darling of Destiny\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 84 - Wisdom](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 85 - Wisdom\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 86 - Undercurrent](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 87 - Laying The Trap](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 88 - An Ambush In The Night](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 89 - An Ambush In The Night\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 90 - The Bloodstained Path](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 91 - The Bloodstained Path\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 92 - Path To Power](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 93 - Path To Power\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 94 - Three Goddesses](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 95 - Three Goddesses\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 96 - Surprise Attack](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 97 - Breaking An Army](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 98 - Meat Grinder](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 99 - A Fierce Battle](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 100 - Battle In The Night](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 101 - Arming Soldiers](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 102 - Persistence And Hope](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 103 - Aftermath](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 104 - A Difficult Trade](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 105 - Bankrupted](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 106 - Conspiracy](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 107 - Conspiracy\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 108 - Untitled](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 109 - Association](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 110 - Rift](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 111 - A Conflict That Cannot Be Resolved](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 112 - Exploration](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 113 - Exploration\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 114 - Sacred Spirit](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 115 - Troll Camp](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 116 - History and Prophecy](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 117 - Sacred Artefacts](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 118 - Sacred Artefacts\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 119 - Spirit Lance](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 120 - Spirit Lance\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 121 - Dawn of Chaos: The Ashen Plateau](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 122 - A Dignified Beard](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 123 - Forgefires](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 124 - True Friendship](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 125 - Where Dreams Begin](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 126 - Trouble](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 127 - Trade](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 128 - Trade\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 129 - Fury](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 130 - Stakes](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 131 - Steamroll](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 132 - One Hit Kill](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 133 - Glory](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 134 - Payoff](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 135 - A Third Ending](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 136 - Longing](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 137 - Just Want To See Her](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 138 - Responsibility](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 139 - Responsibility\(2\)](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 140 - Hunt](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 141 - The Mage Association](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 142 - Ambition](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 143 - The Broodmother Evolves](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 144 - Advancement](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 145 - Guide of Secrets](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 146 - Unavoidable Tranquility](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 147 - Silence Broken](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 148 - How About A Battle?](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 149 - War!](#)  
[Book 3, Chapter 150 - War Is Declared](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 151 - Advance](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 152 - Showdown](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 153 - Showdown\(2\)](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 154 - Breaking The Enemy](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 155 - The First Magic War](#)

[Book 3, Chapter 156 - Broken Ending](#)